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BOOKS BY CONRAD AIKEN

SELECTED POEMS

BLUE VOYAGE

COSTUMES BY EROS

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

SELECTED POEMS

BY

CONRAD AIKEN

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Charles Scribner's Sons
New York London
1931

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COLBY SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

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"Improvisations," "Priapus and the Pool," "Seven Twilights," "Exile," "Samadhi," "Poverty Grass," "Psychomachia," "Chiaroscuro: Rose," "King Borborigmi," "And in the Hanging Gardens," "The Wedding," "God's Acre," "The Road," "Dead Leaf in May," "Cliff Meeting," "Sea Holly," "Elder Tree," "The Room," "Sound of Breaking," "An Old Man Weeping," and "Electra," from "Priapus and the Pool and Other Poems" are reprinted by permission of Horace Liveright, Inc., copyrighted 1925.

P R E F A C E

In this selection, I have included nothing at all from my first book, *Earth Triumphant*, and only four poems from my second and fourth books, *Turns and Movies*, and *Nocturne of Remembered Spring*. My other six books of verse—*The Jig of Forslin*, *The Charnel Rose*, *The House of Dust*, *Punch: The Immortal Liar*, *The Pilgrimage of Festus*, and *Priapus and the Pool*—are given, with one exception, in their entirety. For various reasons, the title poem of *The Charnel Rose* has been omitted. One poem, *Goya*, is here printed as verse for the first time—having previously appeared only as a prose passage in my novel, *Blue Voyage*. The arrangement, throughout, has been chronological: the poems are presented, not in the order in which they were first published, but, except for a few minor instances, in the order in which they were written.

It has been necessary to omit the prefaces to *The Jig of Forslin* and *The Pilgrimage of Festus*. The latter was described, in its preface, as a poetic essay in epistemology, or the problem of knowledge; its hero is anybody or nobody; in short, the poem is a philosophical allegory. The former was apologized for as a symphony, or pseudo-symphony, based on the idea of vicarious experience, and on the part played by that phenomenon in the nature of civilized consciousness.

It remains finally to be noted that for an episode in *The Jig of Forslin* I am indebted to a story by Gautier; and similarly, in *The House of Dust*, to a story by Lafcadio Hearn.

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SELECTED POEMS

BY

CONRAD AIKEN

DISCORDANTS

I

Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread;
Now that I am without you, all is desolate;
All that was once so beautiful is dead.

Your hands once touched this table and this silver,
And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.
These things do not remember you, beloved,—
And yet your touch upon them will not pass.

For it was in my heart you moved among them,
And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes;
And in my heart they will remember always,—
They knew you once, O beautiful and wise.

II

My heart has become as hard as a city street,
The horses trample upon it, it sings like iron,
All day long and all night long they beat,
They ring like the hooves of time.

My heart has become as drab as a city park,
The grass is worn with the feet of shameless lovers,
A match is struck, there is kissing in the dark,
The moon comes, pale with sleep.

My heart is torn with the sound of raucous voices,
They shout from the slums, from the streets, from the crowded
places,
And tunes from a hurdy-gurdy that coldly rejoices
Shoot arrows into my heart.

III

Dead Cleopatra lies in a crystal casket,
Wrapped and spiced by the cunningest of hands.
Around her neck they have put a golden necklace,
Her tatbebs, it is said, are worn with sands.

Dead Cleopatra was once revered in Egypt,
Warm-eyed she was, this princess of the South.
Now she is very old and dry and faded,
With black bitumen they have sealed up her mouth.

O sweet clean earth, from whom the green blade cometh!
When we are dead, my best belovèd and I,
Close well above us, that we may rest forever,
Sending up grass and blossoms to the sky.

IV

In the noisy street,
Where the sifted sunlight yellows the pallid faces,
Sudden I close my eyes, and on my eyelids
Feel from the far-off sea a cool faint spray,—

A breath on my cheek,
From the tumbling breakers and foam, the hard sand shattered,
Gulls in the high wind whistling, flashing waters,
Smoke from the flashing waters blown on rocks;

—And I know once more,
O dearly belovèd!—that all these seas are between us,
Tumult and madness, desolate save for the sea-gulls,
You on the farther shore, and I in this street.

EVENSONG

*This song is of no importance,
I will only improvise;
Yet, maybe, here and there,
Suddenly from these sounds a chord will start
And piercingly touch my heart.*

I

In the pale mauve twilight, streaked with orange,
Exquisitely sweet,—
She leaned upon her balcony and looked across the street;
And across the huddled roofs of the misty city,
Across the hills of tenements, so gray,
She looked into the west with a young and infinite pity,
With a young and wistful pity, as if to say
That dark was coming, and irresistible night,
Which man would attempt to meet
With here and there a little flickering light. . . .
The orange faded, the housetops all were black,
And a strange and beautiful quiet
Came unexpected, came exquisitely sweet,
On market-place and street;
And where were lately crowds and sounds and riot
Was a gentle blowing of wind, a murmur of leaves,
A single step, or voice, and under the eaves
The scrambling of sparrows; and then the hush swept back.

II

She leaned upon her balcony, in the darkness,
Folding her hands beneath her chin;
And watched the lamps begin
Here and there to pierce like eyes the darkness,—
From windows, luminous rooms,
And from the damp dark street
Between the moving branches, and the leaves with rain still
sweet.

It was strange: the leaves thus seen,
With the lamplight's cold bright glare thrown up among them,—
The restless maple leaves,
Twinkling their myriad shadows beneath the eaves,—
Were lovelier, almost, than with sunlight on them,
So bright they were with young translucent green;
Were lovelier, almost, than with moonlight on them. . . .
And looking so wistfully across the city,
With such a young, and wise, and infinite pity
For the girl who had no lover
To walk with her along a street like this,
With slow steps in the rain, both aching for a kiss,—
It seemed as if all evenings were the same,
As if all evenings came
With just such tragic peacefulness as this;
With just such hint of loneliness or pain,
The quiet after rain.

III

Would her lover, then, grow old sooner than she,
And find a night like this too damp to walk?
Would he prefer to stay indoors and talk,
Or read the evening paper, while she sewed, or darned a sock,
And listened to the ticking of the clock:
Would he prefer it to lamplight on a tree?
Would he be old and tired,
And, having all the comforts he desired,
Take no interest in the twilight coming down
So beautifully and quietly on the town?
Would her lover, then, grow old sooner than she?

IV

A neighbor started singing, singing a child to sleep.
It was strange: a song thus heard,—
In the misty evening, after an afternoon of rain,—
Seemed more beautiful than happiness, more beautiful than pain,
Seemed to escape the music and the word,
Only, somehow, to keep
A warmth that was lovelier than the song of any bird.

Was it because it came up through this tree,
Through the lucent leaves that twinkled on this tree,
With the bright lamp there beneath them in the street?
It was exquisitely sweet:
So unaffected, so unconscious that it was heard.
Or was it because she looked across the city,
Across the hills of tenements, so black,
And thought of all the mothers with a young and infinite pity? . . .
The child had fallen asleep, the hush swept back,
The leaves hung lifeless on the tree.

V

It was too bad the sky was dark.
A cat came slinking close along the wall.
For the moon was full just now, and in the park,
If the sky were clear at all,
The lovers upon the moonlit grass would sprawl,
And whisper in the shadows, and laugh, and there
She would be going, maybe, with a white rose in her hair . . .
But would youth at last grow weary of these things,
Of the ribbons and the laces,
And the latest way of putting up one's hair?
Would she no longer care,
In that undiscovered future of recurring springs,
If, growing old and plain, she no longer turned the faces
And saw the people stare?
Would she hear music and not yearn
To take her lover's arm for one more turn? . . .
The leaves hung breathless on the dripping maple tree,
The man across the street was going out.
It was the evening made her think such things, no doubt.
But would her lover grow old sooner than she? . . .
Only the evening made her think such things, no doubt. . . .

VI

And yet, and yet,—
Seeing the tired city, and the trees so still and wet,—
It seemed as if all evenings were the same;
As if all evenings came,
Despite her smile at thinking of a kiss,

With just such tragic peacefulness as this;
With just such hint of loneliness or pain;
The perfect quiet that comes after rain.

ALL LOVELY THINGS

All lovely things will have an ending,
All lovely things will fade and die,
And youth, that's now so bravely spending,
Will beg a penny by and by.

Fine ladies all are soon forgotten,
And goldenrod is dust when dead,
The sweetest flesh and flowers are rotten
And cobwebs tent the brightest head.

Come back, true love! Sweet youth, return!—
But time goes on, and will, unheeding,
Though hands will reach, and eyes will yearn,
And the wild days set true hearts bleeding.

Come back, true love! Sweet youth, remain!—
But goldenrod and daisies wither,
And over them blows autumn rain,
They pass, they pass, and know not whither.

THE JIG OF FORSLIN

PART I

I

In the clear evening, as the lamps were lighted,
Forslin, sitting alone in his strange world,
Meditated; yet through his musings heard
The dying footfalls of the tired day

Monotonously ebb and ebb away
Into the smouldering west;
And heard the dark world slowly come to rest.
Now, as the real world dwindled and grew dim,
His dreams came back to him . . .
Now, as one who stands
In the aquarium's gloom, by ghostly sands,
Watching the glide of fish beneath pale bubbles,—
The bubbles quietly streaming
Cool and white and green . . . poured in silver . . .
He did not know if this were wake or dreaming;
But thought to lean, reach out his hands, and swim.

Some things there were, that, being remembered clearly,
Pierced with a troubling gleam
His lucid dream:
As,—that he had stepped in from a blare of sunlight
Over the watery threshold to this gloom;
Sharp red roofs; blue sky; rich autumn trees
Shaking their gold out on the breeze;
And then, after eternities had vanished,
That he was oldish, and that his name was Forslin,
And that he sat in a small bare gaslit room . . .

In the mute evening, as the music sounded,
Each voice of it, weaving gold or silver,
Seemed to open a separate door for him . . .
Suave horns eluded him down corridors;
Persuasive violins
Sang of nocturnal sins;
And ever and again came the hoarse clash
Of cymbals; as a voice that swore of murder.
Which way to choose, in all this labyrinth?
Did all lead in to the self same chamber?
No matter: he would go . . .
In the evening, as the music sounded;
Streaming swift and thin, or huddled slow . . .

Coffee-cups and artificial palm-trees;
Cigarette-tips glowing in the shadows;
And the mellow gleams in polished marble floors.

The ceaseless footsteps clashed on the cold marble,
 The sinister footman turned the revolving doors.
 And there was he, sitting alone in silence,
 Hearing his heart tick out the hours;
 The futile watcher, chronicle of dead days;
 While the dancers whirled and danced,
 And the murderers chose their knives,
 And the lovers leaned, to kiss, through laurel flowers.

The palm-trees trembled faintly on the music—
 Stirred by an undertone.
 Or rose this music only in his brain?
 The eyes of women, the fans, the jewelled fingers,
 The soon-checked smiles, the swift words lost in laughter,
 Coffee and cigarettes . . . He sat alone.
 The sea of twilight swept his heart again.

And now as one who stands
 In the aquarium's green, by cloudy sands,
 Watching the glide of fish beneath soft bubbles,—
 The bubbles briefly streaming,
 Cold and white . . . poured in silver . . .
 He did not know if this were wake or dreaming:
 But thought to lean, reach out his hands, and swim.

II

Let us drown, then, if to drown is but to change:
 Drown in the days of those whose days are strange;
 Close our eyes, and drown;
 Wearily, without effort, at our leisure,
 In some strange sea-pool, lit with sun and treasure,
 Sink slowly down
 From the bright waves above our phantom hands
 To vales of twilight sands . . .

Grown weary of ourselves, these tedious hours,
 Our voices, our eternal pulses drumming,
 Our doubts, our hesitations, our regrets,
 And the shrinking self that sits within and cowers:
 Let us descend in some strange sea-pool;

Creep through the caves to hear the great tide coming;
Forget our souls that murmur of unpaid debts.

I heard a story, once, of one who murdered,
For what, I cannot remember; but he murdered.
With a knife's greedy edge, or with white hands—
What does it matter? The swift deed was done . . .
That was a sombre sea-pool to explore—
Strange things are on that floor.

And once, the music I was listening to
Suddenly opened, like a luminous book,
To one bright page that told of a strange thing:
A man stepped out in the purple of an arc-light,
A man I knew—I knew him well—
And because the harlot he loved had jilted him,
He held his breath, and died.

Was I that man? How should I know?
Yet, when I die, that man will die with me.
Deep music now, with lap and flow,
Green music streaked with gleams and bubbles of light,
Bears me softly away. Come down with me! . . .
We will live strange lives before this night.

III

The corners of the ceiling are blown like mist,
Are gathered in lazy swirls and blown away.
My eyes are fixed upon a single picture:
This, only, seems to stay.
An old man lurching slowly out of darkness,
A bag upon his shoulders growing monstrous . . .
Now he is gone, before I see his face.
I am spread upon a fog, and know no place.

The yellow footlights blazing before my feet;
The same familiar curving wall of fire.
Soft music trembles sweet . . .
Below me and above me turn the faces,
Rows on rows of luminous living faces,

And the furtive watchful eyes;
I stand before them, somehow grown eternal;
They smile upon me from their eternal places;
And now, at the chosen moment, the music dies.

You see me: I am plain: and growing baldish.
The clothes I wear are old, but carefully kept.
You do not know—indeed, how should you know?—
That for years I have hardly eaten, hardly slept,—
To learn this thing. That does not matter, to you.
You yawn, and wait to see what I can do.

When I was young, juggling was all I did:
I was the best of them;
But growing older, I wanted something better.
To do the impossible! That was the question.
And so I left the stage, and after months,
I thought of this—lying in bed one night—
It seemed ridiculous, too, it was so simple.
To balance one ball on another ball—
Tossing the upper one, to catch it, falling,
In easy balance again—that was the thing!
I started in next day.

Well, sir, you wouldn't believe how hard it was.
Mind you, I wasn't a greenhorn, but an expert—
Made balls, or cards, or hoops, or wooden bottles,
Do anything but talk. But this, by heaven,
This was a man's job! And it took me years.

Practice, practice, practice! That's all it was.
Three times a year I took the stage again
To earn the money to keep alive with:
Used the old tricks, of course, though getting rusty.
Then I'd get off once more, and find a room
With a high ceiling, for plenty of space,
And go to work again. It was three years
Before I got that balancing down cold—
The balancing, not the tossing: just to balance
The one ball on the other, and keep it there . . .
Then came the tossing. That was harder.

Sometimes, by God, I thought I was going crazy!
My brain was full of crashing marble balls.
I'd reach out every direction and try to catch them—
I couldn't, of course,—they'd all crash to the floor,
And keep on banging till my heart fell dead.
It seemed as if my mind was a dark room,
With a ceiling much too low; and every time
I flung a ball up, a million hit that ceiling.
They hit the gas-jet. They broke the foolish lamp-shades.
I was always getting ousted for breaking things,
Denting the ceiling, cracking the plaster and walls.

The lady who lived above me complained of the noise:
So did the man who lived below me.
For five years more I seemed to be always moving—
Always cramming my collars into a bag,
And searching the columns of furnished rooms.

In ten years, though, I had the thing down perfect.
Ten years! I was over forty, and growing grey.
I hadn't married because I hadn't dared to—
No money for it. It was taking chances.
Though as for that, I suppose I might have married,
A girl I met down south, doing a sketch—
I liked her—she was willing, more than willing;
But I had this thing so on my mind, you see,
I couldn't be bothered, somehow, and let it go.

I took my trick to the agents—and they went crazy.
They said they'd never seen a trick to touch it:
O, nothing to it! It was easy getting it on.
One man only—by George, I laughed at him!—
Said the thing looked too easy, and wouldn't take.
But they gave me a little advance for a suit of clothes—
I needed it—and, finally, set the night.

All this, you see, is what is standing before you—
Only, that you don't know it, and I can't tell you.
You see me: I am plain: and growing baldish.
For me, you are rows of faces, lazy eyes.
What does it matter, to you, *who* entertains you? . . .

Now, at the chosen moment, the music dies . . .

I balance the one ball on the other—
It seems so simple—and toss it up, and catch it
In easy balance . . . (My God!)

I'll do it again—for Christ's sake watch me this time!
I balance the one ball on the other . . .
Dip it, and toss it up, and softly catch it
In easy balance again . . . I toss it and catch it . . .
I walk around and keep it balancing there . . .
I toss it and catch it . . . And all the hands are silent!

What is it I am trying to balance—brains?
Or a foolish human life?
There's the curtain falling—and I am over.
I will breathe gas tonight in a locked room,
And forget those faces . . .
Get out of my way! I'm going home.

IV

That window, in which you saw the light winked out
Behind the yellow shades—was that his room?
Tomorrow, we'll search the papers . . . Tonight blows cold . . .
Where shall we turn, among bright cobblestones?
This white carnation I wear is growing old . . .

I have spent years at something; and I am tired.
Let us lounge in a bright café, and listen to music—
Music, threading the smoke of cigarettes . . .
Vermouth, then coffee . . . How much shall we tip the waiter?
Here the fatigued mind wanders and forgets.

I walked by the river, once, and heard the waves
Slapping the sunlit stones . . . But was that I?
Or was it I who saw a pigeon falling
Down a sheer tower wall against the sky?
Or was it I who heard one night the rain
Weaving in silver an intricate pattern of pain?

These things are idle—they do not matter.
If I was born at midnight or high noon,—
Then, or now, or tomorrow, and to whom—
Is this so relevant? Or is it chatter?
My friends, believe me—it is more worth while
To lean for the moment into dream, and smile.

V

Yes; this is manifest: a suicide;
The gas still hissing. Open the windows wide . . .

He closed the door and locked it; and he heard,
In a sudden backward yearning of his mind,
His own slow steps knock wearily up the stairs.
Should he light the gas, then turn it out again?
Survey once more the bed, the floor, the chairs? . . .

He saw himself limp down the windy street,
Bending his face against the relentless cold.
The sharp wind made him cry.
Seen through his tears, bright lamps were rayed and daggered.
Grey ghostly clouds streamed over a starry sky.

He had not dined tonight, nor would he dine—
What, among graveyard friends, was bread or wine?
He closed the stage-door, stumbled in the street.
They said, you turned deep blue: your tongue lolled out . . .
The cobblestones went dizzy beneath his feet.

And now, in a backward yearning of his mind,
He heard his own harsh steps rasp up the stairs,
Thrust the remorseless key in, lit the gas,
Regarded, motionless, the floor, the chairs . . .

A small room: small and dull: yet large enough.
Space for the living: and more than space for the dead.
The ceiling cracked—no matter. It was old.
There was the window, with the shade drawn down . . .
There were his hat and coat, laid on the bed.

And now, with thumb and finger he turned twice
The foolish valve that brought a double darkness—;
And would he wait, in comfort, in a chair?
Or, running the yellow shade up, through the window
Watch cold stars play tragedy out there?

A cab went by, and rumbled into distance;
The hollow ringing hooves echoed and echoed,
In perfect rhythm, always, growing faint.
So went his pulse-beats down remote dark alleys,
With a far rhythmic echo, like complaint.

He listened for them . . . they beat, they beat . . . and beat;
A little curl of dust, a golden vapor,
Idly floating upward from every one.
Upon what streaming road, what cloudy river,
Did those wild horses run?

Someone, once, tried to juggle with stars,
Tried to balance a sun upon a moon,
But found, at last, the sun was much too big . . .
Or was it that the moon was much too small?
There would be flaming death if it should fall.
It fell. And a billion devils danced a jig.

No: it was someone learning to swallow fire—
Strangling to death.
Someone trying, in a great gust of flame,
To draw one deep cool breath . . .
No use, of course. If fire once got within,
It would consume him all.
But this was peace, this darkness!—like old music,
Music heard in a dream; or hid in a wall;
Like a slow music, moving under a sea,
A waveless music, seethed and frothed with starlight,
Desireless; cold; and dead . . .

His hands were tightly clasped beneath his head.

VI

Death, among violins and paper roses,
Leering upon a waltz, in evening dress,
Taking his lady's arm with bow and smile—
This is unreal. Let us pull off our gloves:
Open the doors, and take the air a while.

Death would be sweet, if one might poison music—
Feel a rich rhythm, with its freight of languor,
Feeding under the heart with every beat:
Faint with a waltz in the blood,
Laugh and topple and fall,
Feel the cold marble flush beneath soft feet . . .

Frivolous death! He plays at cards, drinks coffee,
Sips a cordial, or asks his partner the time.
He straightens his cuffs, flicks off an ash, is silent,
Lowers his eyes, and muses on a crime.

Well, no matter. We deal in juxtapositions.
We cry and love, we laugh and hate.
I think of a shrewd blade hidden inside my brain;
And crumple a roseleaf while I meditate.

And while, in the warm dark seats, we watch the spotlight
Dazzle upon the singer's hair and eyes,
The pink tongue, and the diamonds on her fingers,—
Out in the hall an epileptic lies
On the white stone. The usher lifts his head:
The young man laughs at the crowd and falls back dead.

VII

Things mused upon are, in the mind, like music,
They flow, they have a rhythm, they close and open,
And sweetly return upon themselves in rhyme.
Against the darkness they are woven,
They are lost for a little, and laugh again,
They fall or climb.

Here, it rains. The small clear bubbles
Pelt and scatter along the shimmering flagstones,
Leap and sing.
Streaks of silver slant from the eaves,
The sparrow puffs his feathers beneath broad leaves
And preens a darkened wing.

Yet round a windy corner of the mind,
A block away, or at the selfsame place,—
We meet you face to face.
You cough with the dust, we hear you say once more,
There in the shadow of a deserted door,
You are cold, you have no money, and you are hungry.
You open your purse to show us that it is empty.
You are crying; and that is strange, for you are a whore.

. . . Bubbles of soft rain scurrying over a pavement,—
Slanting from dark eaves—
Where did I see a sparrow beneath broad leaves? . . .

Well, take us home with you; and when we have loved you,
(Stroked your drowsy hair, your subtle flesh,
And held your golden throat in the palms of hands)
When we have loved you, and rise
Once more into mortal evening out of your eyes,
We will both give you money; and you may go
To order peacocks' tongues, or a little snow.

. . . There is a seethe of foam far over our hands
On the pale surface . . .
We glide above our shadows along the sands . . .

If you are really so tired, take my arm.
Is this your door? . . . Give me the key.
Why don't you sell these hangings if you are poor?
You deserve to be.

. . . Something about your skin is like soft rain—
Cool and clear . . . it reminds me of many things.
Your eyes, they are like blue wells of pain—

I remember a sparrow preening his rainy wings . . .
He sat under broad leaves, puffing his feathers and winking . . .
What are you thinking?

Now that you're here—there's no use in your going . . .
Wait till the morning. When we have loved we'll sleep.
Sleep is better than wine; and hunger will keep.

. . . Rain, rain, rain. All night the rain.
The roofs are wet, the eaves drip.
The pelted leaves bend down and rise again.
The bubbles chirp and skip.

This is spring. The snowdrops start to grow,
The rain will wash them clean.
This is spring, the warm drops wound the snow,
The black earth aches with green . . .

And now that it is morning, we will go.
What do we care for you—you, only a whore?
Starve if you like! You'll have to end it sometime.
There will be plenty more.
Sell your hangings, pawn your dress, your ear-rings.
What do we care? You knew we wouldn't pay.
That's right, cry! It'll make you feel much better,—
Meanwhile, we go our way . . .

The lamps are turned out on the music racks,
The concert ends, the people rise,
The applause behind us roars like rain on a roof,
The great doors close. We shrink beneath blue skies.
Was this a music? Or did I hear a story?
Yet I remember well that hair, those eyes . . .

And much besides, that, nimble even as music,
Sings, flashes, is gone . . .
For a million years the gods have been telling me secrets.
I do not remember one.

PART II

I

Let us succumb to a soft blue wave of music:
Endure its pressure, let it explore our souls,
Inquisitive, cold, and strange.
We will pay no heed to a plaintive bell that tolls
Far over our heads, in sunlight . . . forever restless . . .
But yield our depths to the silent flow of change.

Here all is dark, all leans upon the stream.
Here we may flow from opiate sound to sound,
Embodied in music. Here we may live our dream.
Here is no striving, no choosing. We do not know
Whither we drift, but shut our eyes and go.

I have surrendered my heart to chords of sound,
Sweet successions of falling sound;
A star is snared in sinister boughs of twilight
Against a pale green sky.
I have surrendered my soul to a pleading music;
I drink a poison of melody and I die.

Here are hands I reached from the dust to touch,
Eyes I loved in the darkness and left behind.
Here, unforgotten mouths I never kissed.
I tried with hands to brush aside a mist . . .
Come, let us flow with the music, and seek, and find.

Once I loved; and once I died; and once
I murdered my lover, my lover who had betrayed me.
Once I stepped from the threshold, and saw my body
Huddled in purple snow.
Once I escaped my flesh and rose on starlight.
The theme returns . . . We bow our hearts and go.

One night, I swam with pilgrims by the moon,
Swam by moonlight in a wide blue river;
A field of flax in flower.
I drowned among the stalks, the tossing stars.
I breathed green foam. I was covered with seethe of leaves . . .

But who was he I left behind me, waiting
There on the platform, reading an evening paper?
He looked up once, to see if it would rain . . .
Great leaves are turned between us. Moons are scattered.
The theme recurs . . . And we drift on again.

II

If we should rise from whirl to silver whirl,
Through yellowing light to a faintly chiming surface,
And shatter the film . . . what discords should we hear? . . .
Monstrous shadows blot and disintegrate;
The stars above our earth are cold and clear;

And we walk, as we have walked a thousand times,
Past trees and curbs and gutters,
Mark how the arc-lamp dims and starts and sputters,
Muse bewitching scandals, ponder crimes,
Laugh with a friend, concealing what we think,
Or sit, to chat and drink.

Someone has been to have his fortune told—
With Tarot cards. The pentacles and wands
Tell him he hates the women, and is cold.
He laughs, we laugh,—we wonder if he lies,
Watching a wizened question in his eyes.

And if he lies, and if last night he slept
With some flushed harlot, or his latest lover,
We muse upon him, and marvel what it is
That yields his banal soul these ecstasies:

Is it his voice that sets a woman trembling,
The hesitant speech, the sidelong trick of eyes,
The heavy brow, the dead white skin?
Or is he all the while dissembling,—
Like us, though starved, incapable of sin?

We chronicle his speech, and afterwards
Confer upon him . . . We ravel out his brain.

We have remembered certain curious words
He uttered once when drinking: these explain . . .
Priests of dissection are we: we dissect him.
It is ourselves have pain, but pleasant pain.

And so, good-night. The white clouds gulf the stars,
Dust blows down the street,
Through divers moonlit canyons glide our feet.

III

Before us ghostly paths flow into the darkness,
Slant upon windy darkness, weave and gleam.
Or are they climbs of music, half-remembered?
Or do we gaze at some unsteady dream?

This is the night for murder: Get us knives:
We have long sought for this. .
What queen, tonight, is murdered with a kiss?
What kings tonight shall forfeit their rash lives?
Rosamund, with a red skull in her hands;
Helen in starlight, watching beacons flare;
Or Cleopatra, combing her blue-black hair.

She lies before me, smiling. She has betrayed me . . .
Her flesh was sweeter to me than orange-blossoms,
Her hair more marvellous to me than night.
Her voice was a breaking of golden ripples,
I stood in her eyes as in a sea of light.
I loved her for all these things . . . But she has betrayed me.

Tell them to play loud music in the hall—
Blow horns, beat drums, and strike on brass . . .
No one shall hear us now. We are hidden in tumult.

I would remind you of our wedding-night,
Of the sweet music we listened to through love . . .
But you demur, just as I hoped: you say
'Why talk of that?'—pretending modesty;
And sigh, and drop your eyes . . . Yes, you remember
My mouth upon your eyelids, and it disgusts you.
For now you have found a mouth you desire much more.

This purple silk that suits your throat so well—
(How I have loved that throat! It dazzles me.)
And these jade scarabs trembling from your ears:
Do you remember when I gave them to you?
And how you clung to me?
And do you remember dropping from your hair
White hyacinth flowers? . . .

No, you are musing—you stare, but do not see:
Your eyes are fixed upon the foolish fountain;
You seem to listen: hearing whose voice, I wonder?

I would remind you of the day we walked
Beside the river, twisting each other's hands—
Queer, what a pang can be in the flesh of hands!—
And saw white pigeons flying across the water,
And golden flakes of light dancing in azure,
And broad pale streams of sun poured down the west.
We were both young. The world lay luminous:
Every petal and cobweb trembled music . . .
Do you remember—or is this commonplace?
And do I—perhaps—touch things you would forget?

You guess I am angry—I have betrayed myself.
You open your eyes, startled, a little wider—
Things are unfolding here you did not dream of.
Do you divine the virgin knife, perhaps . . . ?
What was I going to say . . . O yes, the time
I saw you first . . . so many years ago . . .
My God, how innocent your eyes looked, too!—
All in white, by the palace door, you stood,
Talking with some young thing,
Until you saw me come, and turned your head
In an absent way to dart my eyes with yours . . .
There was your whole soul in that little trick—
I could not see it, then . . . I see it now.

Why has the music stopped? I gave no order.
Let it continue. Not the strings,
But horns and drums. And gnashing of brass.

They say young what's-his-name—you know, the captain—
Has come to town again. O, don't you know him?
I thought you did. But then, it's no great matter.
His quarters are not so spacious as they were,
And somewhat dark . . . And yet he was reputed
A man of fabulous wealth! And many ladies,
(Or so they say,)
Wear costly favors from him—rings and bracelets—
Why do you hide your hand?—and such like trifles.

You are pale. I have mentioned something that concerns you.
Was it this captain? . . . I hope you notice
I use the past tense, now, in speaking of him.
Yes, it's a pity—he was full of promise—
Quick of eye, though somewhat tardy of arm . . .
And think of all the ladies with broken hearts!

Sit still, my dear. It's no use running now.
You guess my purpose: and, surely, you give me credit
For planning all details with scrupulous care!
The doors are locked—the curtains drawn across them—
No one would hear you if you beat upon them.
And even if you could scream, in so great terror,
Could you scream louder than horns and cymbals and gongs?

You should have been a player, and played to music.
How well you mimic horror! Your stretched eyes
Almost persuade me that you understand me!
Now, will you take death quietly,—or with struggle?
Take my advice: let it be soft and certain—
Surrender to it, make it a suicide—
A slow thin push at the heart, and then, red darkness.

This is a pity: I loved you. I will not blame you,
Now that it's all too late.
This little knife, for the moment, is my tongue.
But we were happy, in our season,—
And it is you who shaped this end.

Here's my knife—between my fingers I press it,
And into the panic heart . . .

Do you still hear the music? Do you still see me?
Do wide lights swim and dazzle before your eyes?

Make haste, great queen! The darkness opens for you . .
Now they can stop their music. I am tired.
Shall I withdraw the knife,—or leave it there? . . .

IV

We move in the music, and are one with it.
You close your eyes, your fan against my arm.
Sometimes, I have thought this tongue of yours had wit.

But are you real, in spite of lips and eyes,
And the webbed hair translucent against the light—
You, who upon this music fall and rise?

What would you say if as we smoothly turn
To the slow waltz that beats these walls, this floor;
Or as we wave past palm-trees through the door;
If I should mildly observe, as commonplace,
'Yes, I murdered my wife this afternoon' . . .
Would you think me out of tune?

My hands are red with murder, if you could see them—
Or were they certain hands inside my brain?
It is difficult to explain . . .
Two lovers, once, went walking beside a river:
There was a white cloak and a wet red stain . . .

And a blade comes gliding in along the music,
Between the pulses.—What becomes of it?
Does it only cut the page,—or pierce a heart? . . .
The hypocritical music sighs and turns.
It murmurs of palms, of artificial ferns.

And now there are horns and drums, they strike on silver,
Cymbals are smitten, great gongs clang:
It is as if they did it to drown a murder.
They deafen the air with clamor, they hide a scream . . .
Do I dance or murder now? Or do I dream?

No, this was real, this murder—she is there,
Lying among her roses where I left her,
With her eyes closed and a pale rose in her hair . . .
And you, with whom I dance,—or think I dance,—
Thin out and vanish like sound upon still air.

V

This dust I softly blow across my hand,
Fibreless now, was the soft woven fragrance
She threw about her throat as evening came.
Here are the rings. Here is a comb of amber.
Here, the small silver plate that tells her name.
There is no trace of blood, here in the dust—
No trace of violence. Dust is most discreet.
All that is hinted is sedate and sweet.

A goblin-ring of junipers marks the place—
Half way up the hillside. I remember
How white, beside the juniper, was her face . . .
There is a graveyard look to juniper—
Furtive and sinister.
It sidles out of the graves to keep an eye
On the black crows that caw beneath this sky.

There is no need that murder should be known.
Murderers are foolish. In their panic,
They leave a scarf, a handkerchief, a knife,
The newly purchased pistol, on the floor—
And leaving this, of course, they leave much more.

Once, I killed a priest, before his altar,
With his own crucifix—
Smashed through a stained glass window, in the moonlight,
To steal the silver chalice, the candlesticks . . .
They tracked my footsteps through the snow,
I heard them coming, and hid in a door—
And I struck one down with the heavy candlestick,
But what was one to four? . . .
The rest is vague. I saw it long ago.

And once I murdered, by the waterfront:
A drunken sailor, in a peg-house brawl.
We were all drinking, and laughing, and having a love-feast,
And somehow got to quarreling after a while.
Maybe it was jealousy—I don't know.
But all of a sudden this boy went red with rum,
I saw his little eyes shut up and burn,
'By God,' he says, 'I'll fix you!'—He pulls a knife
And runs for me, with his slaverling mouth wide open.

All the rest were lying around the floor
Half soused, and naked, and all too scared to help.
In the smoky light I jumped across pale bodies,
Stepped on somebody's hand and heard him yell,
Tripped over somebody's leg, went sprawling headlong.
But somehow managed to get behind a table
Just before he reached me. I grabbed the lamp,
One of those heavy glass ones, and let him have it
Smash in the forehead. And he dropped without a whimper.
It crushed his brain in, oh it was something awful! . . .
No one, not even his mother, would have known him.
So we just slipped him quietly off the wharf
Into the river, and that was the end of it.

And then, before I came to peg-house pimping,—
Or was it after? Time is confusing me,
Time is a circle, a snake that devours itself . . .
For a moment I peer up closely into starlight,
For a moment I walk once more a lamplit street,
See all things clearly out of time and space.
I smoke, and narrow my eyes to meditate,
Hear music swell and die, see coffins pass,
Watch the blown daisies bend upon the grass,
Glide through revolving doors to walk on marble,
To listen amused to the swift uneven footfalls,
Or the complaints of violins hidden in walls;
To climb at last to a little dingy room,
Three flights up or more,
And listen, through the loneliness and gloom,
To the drowsy footfalls of the tired day
Monotonously ebb and ebb away

Into the smouldering west;
And hear the dark world slowly come to rest . . .

And then, before I came to peg-house pimping,
Or maybe afterwards—what does it matter?
This happened; well, it must have been before . . .
I smell the circus smell—the stale rank sawdust,
Hear elephants snorting dust and straws;
I see once more the chariots rumbling round,
The red-mouthed clown, the enormous crowd applauding,
Trumpets blowing, greyhounds leaping through hoops;
And I see my wife, in spangles, with a whip in her hand,
Chivvying sullen leopards to their cages.

She left me, because she liked the red-mouthed clown.
Both of them quit the circus; and for years
I hunted for them, swearing I'd kill them both.
I went on day by day, doing my stunt,—
The dive of death,—as if it hadn't happened:
Twice a day I took the Dive of Death,
Falling a hundred feet to a little net.
And all the while I nursed my grievance, and waited.

At last I found them: they were still living together,
Drinking and starving there, with a boy and a girl.
On a bright Sunday noon I went and found them.
I knocked on the door. 'Come in!' She said . . .
And there she was, feeding bread to a parrot,
Thin, but looking the same; and there was he
Rocking his head on a scarlet table-cloth,
Silly with beer. 'Well, here I am, Marie!'—
She screamed, and half got up. The boy and girl
Came running in, they grabbed me round the legs.
'Harry!' she gasped, the tears rolled down her cheeks,
Her face grew redder and redder, she began to gurgle;
But I locked my hands around her dirty throat,
And though they bit me, I choked her till she was dead.

Her man looked up, and waved a hand toward me,
And fell asleep again. I took the children
And flung them down from the balcony to the courtyard:

I suppose I shouldn't have done it. Then I climbed
Up on the railing, and folded my arms, all ready
For one last Dive of Death. And there they got me . . .
Those damned fool neighbors heard the children screaming,
And spoiled the climax. And so they marched me off
Through Sunday streets, with people coming from church,
And bells tolling, and the May sun shining;
For the last time I walked under elm-trees and oak-trees,
And saw the grass, and the shadows of pebbles, and people.
But I had paid her out, as I said I would . . .
So what did I care? My hands were satisfied . . .

VI

Wind blows: the dying music recedes from me;
The shadows of trees revolve and melt in the wind;
And papers skip and pirouette over the grass.
The lamps are lighted, the sea-gulls drift to sea,
Night falls with a shrill of horns; or is it daybreak?
Realities fade; dreams come; and dreams pass.
No matter how swift I run, the stars run with me . . .
Let us lounge in a bright café and listen to music,
Music, treading the smoke of cigarettes.
For years I have borne in my heart a burden of hatred . . .
Vermouth, then coffee . . . how much should we tip the waiter?
Here the fatigued mind wanders and forgets.

PART III

I

Now that the sun flows over the edge of the hills,
Over blue peaks of dream,
And brightly again down into the frosted meadows,
We hear young maidens singing, and silently watch them
Dance in the sharp light, wheeling their long blue shadows . . .

This is as if in the drowse of noon,
White petals trembled down from the boughs of heaven.
We stretch our hands, we close our eyes, we lift our faces;
The fall of the sun is a poured music.

This is as if, in the going of twilight,
When skies are pale and stars are cold,
Dew should rise from the grass in little bubbles,
And tinkle in music among green leaves.

Something immortal lives in such an air—
We breathe, we change.
Our bodies become as cold and bright as starlight,
Our hearts grow young and strange.

Let us extend ourselves as evening shadows
And learn the nocturnal secrets of these meadows.

II

Some have wedded sea-girls and lived in the sea,
Hearing the whisper of surf far over their hands,
And tuned their loving
To green and purple twilight, lazily moving
On the cold sway of tides;
Watching the little fish blow bubbles and sands;
And the ships passing, like dark clouds, silently.

And I was one of these, but wearied of it,
Of the faint laughter, and the ghostly speech,
And so in the moonlight I climbed the pebbled hill,
And stood up, startled, on a sunlit beach . . .
I remember her glaucous eyes, her long cool fingers,
And the pale mouth, and the sad white face—
And her voice, thinly singing, an elfin music
Heard in an elfin place . . .
But that was long ago. I do not remember
What was her name, or why it was that I loved her.

Some are moonstruck, and love a demon woman;
And wander the world forever after
Hearing an echo of marvelous laughter:
These are pale, as who have seen holy things,
They stumble on stones,
Their eyes are forever startled by knowledge of wings . . .
My blood was tranced at night by the palest woman,

But when I kissed her the blood in my veins went cold,
Her mouth was as cold as the sea.
Among the leaves she rose like fire;
Her eyes were phosphor: her cold hands burned.
But when the red sun clanged she fell from me,
She fell from my lips with an anguished cry,
And a jewelled snake I saw her lie
Wreathing her sluggish ashes in green grass beaded with dew,
Her little eyes red in the sun.
My heart lay dead when I saw the thing I had done,
And I struck at the wind, I ran in the dark,
I kissed the huge hands of time, I laughed at rain;
For I who had loved a lamia, well I knew
I should never again love a mortal, or see her again . . .

Grey ghosts move in the lamplight: these are dreams.
Turn back the page, strike a profounder chord,
We will resolve these phantoms in clear fire.
Our spirits have ridden abroad.
Far off, we hear the gallop of demon desire.

III

As one who dreams, in a light sleep, may hear
Sounds through his dream,—bells, or passing steps
On the floor above him, or in the street below,—
Rhythmic, precise and clear:
Or voices muttering in an adjacent room,
Lifting a moment, to die again;—
Yet all the while he will pursue his dream,
Guessing a sinister purport in well-known sounds,
And still in his own deep silent world remain:
So now I guess the world from which I came,
In flares of light, ghosts of remembered sound,
Which haunt me here . . . A voice, a street, a bell . . .
Whence do I come, and why? And what's my name?

And you, who cut an orange upon a plate,
With a small silver knife, and lean, and smile,—
You whose mouth is a sly carnivorous flower,
Whose flesh is softer and cooler than rainy wind,—

I gaze upon you, and muse strange aberrations,
I hear unearthly music, ghostly flutes;
I dance in a black eclipse, and through my veins
Is a cold froth of sea; and you are forgotten . . .

And you, who when your act is over peer
Witchlike between the curtains, above the footlights,
Holding the curtains with jewelled hands, to smile
A slow and mordant smile from cavernous eyes—
What hideous things amuse you secretly?
What have you drunk to make your lips so red?
And when the moon creeps up, and stars dance coldly,
And crickets cry in the dew, and dead leaves fall,
Do you spread bat-wings from a starlit wall? . . .

Music dissolves and dies,—and sings again,
Changing its mood; the lights wink out in darkness,
A shrill wind crosses us, we are blown and stagger.
Our footsteps ring intense. The lights return.
And we have silently changed . . . To what, to whom?

IV

Midnight it was, or just before;
And as I dipt for the hundredth time
The small white quill to add a rhyme
To the cold page, in candlelight,
Whereon my treatise slowly grew,—
Someone harshly knocked at the door;
And marvelling I became aware
That with that knock the entire night
Went mad; a sudden tempest blew;
And shrieking goblins rode the air.

Alarmed, not knowing why, I rose
And dropt my quill across the page.
What demon now, what archimage,
So roiled the dark? And my blood froze
When through the keyhole, with the wind,
A freezing whisper, strangely thinned,
Called my name out, called it twice:

My heart lay still, lay black as ice.
The candle trembled in my hands;
Between my fingers the dim light went;
Shadows hurried and shrank and blent,
Huddled, grotesque, in sarabands,
Amazed my eyes, till dumb I stood,
And seemed to see upon that air
Goblins with serpents in their hair,
Mouths contorted for soundless cries,
And hands like claws, and wounded throats,
And winking embers instead of eyes.
The blood went backward to my heart.
Thrice in the night a horn was blown.
And then it seemed that I had known,
For ages, even before my birth,
When I was out with wind and fire,
And had not bargained yet with earth,
That this same night the horn would blow
To call me forth. And I would go.
And so, as haunted dead might do,
I drew the bolt and dropped the chain,
And stood in dream, and only knew
The door had opened and closed again:
Until between my eyelids came
A woman's face, a sheath of flame,
The wink of opals in dusky hair,
A golden throat, a smile like fire,
And eyes that seemed to burn the air
So luminous were they with desire.
She laid one hand upon my arm
And straight a blaze was in my veins,
It pierced me so I feared a charm,
And shrank; whereat, pale, hurriedly,
She whispered 'Quickly! Come with me!
All shall be clear! But now make haste—
Four hours till dawn, no time to waste!'—
The amazing whiteness of her skin
Had snared my eyes, and now her voice
Seethed in my ears, and a ghost of sin
Died, and above it I heard rejoice
Loud violins, in chords ascending,

And laughter of virgins; I blew the light,
And followed her, heedless of the ending,
Into the carnival of that night.

Make haste, beloved! the night passes,
The day breaks, the cock crows,
Mist slinks away in the sunlight,
And the thin blood drips from the rose.

Black stallions rushed us through the air,
Their hooves upon the wind struck fire;
Rivers, and hills, and a moonlit spire
Glided beneath us, and then a flare
Of gusty torches beckoned us down
To a palace-gate in a darkened town.
She took my hand and led me in
Through walls of basalt and walls of jade,
And I wondered, to hear a violin
Sweetly within that marble played.
I heard it sing, a wandering tone,
Imprisoned forever in that deep stone.

And then upon a couch we lay,
And heard invisible spirits play
A ghostly music; the candles muttered,
Rose-leaves trembled upon the floor,
Lay still, or rose on the air and fluttered;
And while the moon went dwindling down
Poisoning with black web the skies,
She narrowed her eyelids, and fixed her eyes,
Fiercely upon me; and searched me so
With speeding fire in every shred
That I, consumed with a witching glow,
Knew scarcely if I were alive or dead:
But lay upon her breast, and kissed
The deep red mouth, and drank the breath,
And heard it gasping, how it hissed
To mimic the ecstasy of death.
Above us in a censer burning
Was dust of lotos-flowers, and there
Ghosts of smoke were ever turning,

And gliding along the sleepy air,
And reaching hands, and showing faces,
Or coiling slowly like blue snakes,
To charm us moveless in our places . . .
But then she softly raised her head
And smiled through brooding eyes, and said
'O lover, I have seen you twice.
You changed my veins to veins of ice.
The first time, it was Easter Eve,—
By the church door you stood alone;
You listened to the priests intone
In pallid voices, mournfully;
The second time you passed by me
In the dusk, but did not see . . .'
Her whisper hissed through every vein
And flowered coldly in my brain . . .
I slept, how long I do not know;
But in my sleep saw huge lights flare,
And felt a rushing of wild air,
And heard great walls rock to and fro . . .
Make haste, beloved! The cock crows,
And the cold blood drips from the rose . . .

. . . And then I woke in my own room,
And saw the first pale creep of sun
Drip through the dewy shutters, and run
Across the floor, and in that gloom
Marvelled to find that I had slept
Still fully dressed, and that I kept
One bruised white rose-leaf in my hand—
From whom?—and could not understand.

For seven days my quill I dipt
To wreathe slow filigrees of script:
For seven nights when midnight came,
I swooned, I swept away on flame,
Rushed on the stallions of the air,
Heard goblins laugh, saw torches flare,
And all night long, while music mourned
Hidden under the trembled floor,
I heard her low strange voice implore

As one who speaks from under the earth,
Imploring music, imploring mirth,
Before the allotted time was done
And cock crew up the sullen sun.
Day by day my face grew pale,
Hollowed and purple were my eyes,
I blinked beneath too brilliant skies:
And sometimes my weak hand would fail,
Blotting the page whereon I wrought . . .
This woman is a witch! I thought . . .
And I resolved that night to find
If this were real, or in my mind.

Viol and flute and violin
Remote through labyrinths complained.
Her hand was foam upon my skin.
And then I closed my eyes and feigned
A sudden sleep; whereat her eyes
Peered, and darkened, and opened wide,
Her white brow flushed, and by my side
Laughing, with little ecstatic cries,
She kissed my mouth, she stroked my hair,
And fed upon me with fevered stare.
'One little drop!' she murmured then—
'One little bubble from this red vein,
And safe I await the sun again—'.
I heard my heart hiss loud and slow;
A gust of wind through the curtains came;
It flapped the upright candle-flame.
Her famishing eyes began to glow,
She bared my arm; with a golden pin,
Leaned, and tenderly pricked the skin.
And as the small red bubble rose,
Her eyes grew bright with an evil light,
She fawned upon me; and my heart froze
Seeing her teeth so sharp and white. . . .

Vampire! I cried. The flame puffed out.
Two blazing eyes withdrew from me.
The music tore discordantly.
The darkness swarmed with a goblin rout.

Great horns shattered, and walls were falling,
Green eyes glowed, voices were calling;
And suddenly then the night grew still,
The air blew suddenly damp and chill,
Stars above me paled in the sky,
Far off I heard one mournful cry—
Or under the earth—and then I found
I lay alone on the leafy ground.
And when stars died, and the cock crowed,
The first pale pour of sunlight showed
That it was on a grave I lay,
A new-made grave of tumbled clay.

That night I took a priest with me;
And sharp at the midnight, secretly,
By lantern-light, with spade and pick,
Striking on stones with loamy click,
We laid a golden coffin bare,
And sprinkled the holy water there.
And straight we heard a sorrowful cry;
Something upon the dark went by;
The trees thrashed in a sudden gust;
Pebbles rattled in windy dust,
Far off, wildly, pealed a bell,
A voice sobbed, and silence fell.
And I grew sad, to think that I
Should make that marvellous spirit die. . . .

Make haste, beloved! The night passes,
The day creeps, the cock crows,
Mist slinks away in the pale sun
And the opened grave must close.

V

Vampires, they say, blow an unearthly beauty,
Their bodies are all suffused with a soft witch-fire,
Their flesh like opal . . . their hair like the float of night.
Why do we muse upon them, what secret's in them?
Is it because, at last, we love the darkness,
Love all things in it, tired of too much light?

Here on the lamplit pavement, in the city,
Where the high stars are lost in the city's glow,
The eyes of harlots go always to and fro—
They rise from a dark world we know nothing of,
Their faces are white, with a strange love—
And are they vampires, or do I only dream? . . .
Lamps on the long bare asphalt coldly gleam.

And hearing the ragtime from a cabaret,
And catching a glimpse, through turning doors,
Of a spangled dancer swaying with drunken eyes,
Applauded and stared at by pimps and whores—
What decadent dreams before us rise? . . .

The pulse of the music thickens, it grows macabre,
The horns are a stertorous breath,
Someone is dying, someone is raging at death . . .
Around a coffin they dance, they pelt dead roses,
They stand the coffin on end, a loud spring clangs,
And suddenly like a door the coffin uncloses—
And a skeleton leers upon us in evening dress,—
There in the coffin he stands,
With his hat in his white-gloved hands,
And bows, and smiles, and puffs at a cigarette.
Harlots blow kisses to him, and fall, forgotten,
The great clock strikes; soft petals drift to the floor;
One by one the dancers float through the door,
Hair is dust, flesh is rotten,
The coffin goes down into darkness, and we forget. . . .

Who told us this? Was it a music we heard,
A picture we saw, a dream we dreamed? . . .
I am pale, I am strangely tired.
A warm dream lay upon me, its red eyes gleamed,
It sucked my breath . . . It sighed . . . It afflicted me . . .
But was that dream desired, or undesired?

We must seek other tunes, another fragrance:
This slows the blood in our hearts, and cloyes our veins.
Open the windows. Show us the stars. We drowse.

PART IV

I

Twilight is spacious, near things in it seem far,
And distant things seem near.
Now in the green west hangs a yellow star.
And now across old waters you may hear
The profound gloom of bells among still trees,
Like a rolling of huge boulders beneath seas.

Silent as thought in evening contemplation
Weaves the bat under the gathering stars.
Silent as dew we seek new incarnation,
Meditate new avatars.
In a clear dusk like this
Mary climbed up the hill to seek her son,
To lower him down from the cross, and kiss
The mauve wounds, every one.

Men with wings
In the dusk walked softly after her.
She did not see them, but may have felt
The winnowed air around her stir,
She did not see them, but may have known
Why her son's body was light as a little stone.
She may have guessed that other hands were there
Moving the watchful air.

Now, unless persuaded by searching music
Which suddenly opens the portals of the mind,
We guess no angels,
And are contented to be blind.
Let us blow silver horns in the twilight,
And lift our hearts to the yellow star in the green,
To find perhaps, if, while the dew is rising,
Clear things may not be seen.

II

Under a tree I sit, and cross my knees,
And smoke a cigarette.
You nod to me: you think perhaps you know me.
But I escape you, I am none of these;
I leave my name behind me, I forget. . . .

I hear a fountain shattering into a pool;
I see the gold fish slanting under the cool;
And suddenly all is frozen into silence.
And among the firs, or over desert grass,
Or out of a cloud of dust, or out of darkness,
Or on the first slow patter of sultry rain,
I heard a voice cry 'Marvels have come to pass,—
The like of which shall not be seen again!'

And behold, across a sea one came to us,
Treading the wave's edge with his naked feet,
Slowly, as one might walk in a ploughed field.
We stood where the soft waves on the shingle beat,
In a blowing mist, and pressed together in terror,
And marvelled that all our eyes might share one error.

For if the fisher's fine-spun net must sink,
Or pebbles flung by a boy, or the thin sand,
How shall we understand
That flesh and blood might tread on the sea-water
And foam not wet the ankles? We must think
That all we know is lost, or only a dream,
That dreams are real, and real things only dream.

And if a man may walk to us like this
On the unstable sea, as on a beach,
With his head bowed in thought—
Then we have been deceived in what men teach;
And all our knowledge has come to nought;
And a little flame should seek the earth,
And leaves, falling, should seek the sky,
And surely we should enter the womb for birth,
And sing from the ashes when we die.

Or was the man a god, perhaps, or devil?
They say he healed the sick by stroke of hands;
And that he gave the sights of the earth to the blind.
And I have heard that he could touch a fig-tree,
And say to it, 'Be withered!' and it would shrink
Like a cursed thing, and writhe its leaves, and die.
How shall we understand such things, I wonder,
Unless there are things invisible to the eye?

And there was Lazarus, raised from the dead:
To whom he spoke quietly, in the dusk,—
Lazarus, three days dead, and mortified;
And the pale body trembled; as from a swoon,
Sweating, the sleeper woke, and raised his head;
And turned his puzzled eyes from side to side. . . .

Should we not, then, hear voices in a stone,
Talking of heaven and hell?
Or if one walked beside a sea, alone,
Hear broodings of a bell?—

Or on a green hill in the evening's fire,
If we should stand and listen to poplar trees,
Should we not hear the lit leaves suddenly choir
A jargon of silver music against the sky?—
Or the dew sing, or dust profoundly cry?—

If this is possible, then all things are:
And I may leave my body crumpled there
Like an old garment on the floor;
To walk abroad on the unbetraying air;
To pass through every door,
And see the hills of the earth, or climb a star.

Wound me with spears, you only stab the wind;
You nail my cloak against a bitter tree;
You do not injure me.
I pass through the crowd, the dark crowd busy with murder,
Through the linked arms I pass;
And slowly descend the hill, through dew-wet grass.

III

They tell me John, at Herod's court, is dead:
John with whom I talked beneath a plane-tree:
John, whose holy touch is on my head.

Herod, mark my words, you shall pay for this!
You shall forever yield to the dance of demons;
And see your grizzled head in a bowl of fire.

They say his loud voice crying from the cistern,
Calling the curse of God upon Herodias,
Troubled her night and day.
She heard his restless chain clank in the cistern.
In the night-time she heard him cry 'Adulteress!'—
And Herod heard him, and laughed; and the Roman captains;
And now he is dead, they say.

For in the banquet-room
The lovely Jewess crept and danced,
While he was drinking wine she came and danced.
Dance, Jewess! For much depends upon you:
And you shall be rewarded with something precious.
Behind the curtains Herodias quivers,
Her cruel eyes are narrowed on you;
And Herod follows you through a cloud of wine.

There is no music in the banquet-room,
But the snores of sodden guests.
Dance, Jewess! Dance, Salome!
Beautiful are your hands, beautiful are your breasts.
You are young and lovely, your body is slender,
You waver like a running fire,
Herodias hates you, behind the tall curtain,
And Herod beams upon you through a cloud of desire.

She dances through the old heart of Herod,
Causing him great pain and sadness;
She draws the sap of longing into his veins;
She smiles, and he smiles too.

He trembles, watching the languor of her body,
Her cool deliberate feet.
And John is quiet, in the dark cistern,
Hearing above his head a rhythmic beat.

And now they have rewarded her with a precious thing—
She laughs, and carries it high upon her hands,
She dances with it, she weeps upon it—
She kisses the dark hair.
She bears it before her on a bright salver,
She is pale with love, she dances slowly;
And Herod cries into his shaken wine-cup,
Cries, for giving the harlot a thing that is holy.

Dance, Jewess! Dance, white-kneed Salome!
Laugh or cry, what does it matter?
Your little mouth is red with the blood of a prophet;
The shouting of dreams is on your platter.

Dust arises over the desert and dances,
And sleeps again under a winter moon.
Salome, Herod, Herodias—you shall all perish,
You shall all be dust soon . . .

Sometime, I should like to see this Jewess, Salome—
She is fair, they say, and young.
Through her, things come to pass as prophesied:
God speaks with a strange tongue.

And so at the court of Herod, he is dead . . .
John, with whom I talked by an old plane-tree . . .
John, whose fiery hands are on my head.

IV

You smoke with me: you do not think
That I have stood by Jordan's brink:
You talk with me, and do not guess
That I have power to curse or bless. . . .

You think you know me, know my name,
Can tell me where and whence I came—
Is knowing to be so simple, then?
And am I one, or a million, men?

Brother Peter walked up and down
The cloister shade in a corded gown.
The fountain splashed by the blue yew-trees,
The sun was shot with glistening bees.
From hill to hill sang bell to bell,
The May sky dreamed; and softly fell,
Some in the shadow, and some in the sun,
Small Judas petals, one by one.

Brother Peter was sick with care,
His pulses beat slow tunes of prayer.
His heart was like a yellowing leaf,
From bell to bell he mused his grief.
He did not see the bright drops spatter,
Nor Judas blossoms blow and scatter,
He did not see the bees weave by,
Nor sombre yews in the soft May sky—
But up and down his sandalled feet
Soft on the dustless flagstones beat.
And up and down his musings went
Weaving a pattern of discontent.

At Fiesole, betwixt bell and bell,
It was there the hideous thing befell;
Working there with Brother Paul
Pruning the vine-leaves on a wall.
Among the ghostly olive-trees
That shook like silver in the breeze,
A peasant girl came singing by,
Golden of skin and quick of eye,
She turned her cheek and glanced at him,
And straight he forgot his seraphim. . . .
Fior di Ginestra—so she sang,
And yellow bloom in his grey heart sprang,—
Yellow blossoms were on his tongue
And this was May, and she was young.

He looked along, but Brother Paul
Worked at the far end of the wall.
He looked again, and she had turned,
And smiled, and all his body burned.
Petals of pale fire whirled his brain,
His blood was a chorus of singing pain,
And—Holy Mary! who taught him this?—
Sudden he blew the girl a kiss. . . .
Her brown feet flashed along the grass,
And through the gate he saw them pass—
She waved one hand, the gate went clang,
And '*Fior di Ginestra*'—so she sang.

Brother Paul turned round to see
The source of all this levity.
Brother Peter snipped at a leaf,
But now his heart was sick with grief.
'Christ, Thy pardon!' he said and said.
He prayed; but still it swooned his head,
'*Fior di Ginestra*,' sweet as sun;
And he saw her feet like laughter run.

He counted beads, he begged of Heaven
That such a sin might be forgiven;
But the thing that seemed so simple there
Turned, in the cloister, to despair.
He lit two candles of pointed flame
And sought to forget in work his shame:
Opened the marvellous manuscript
Embossed with azure and gold, and dipt
His brush in little cups of paint
For the wings and aureole of a saint.
But the bright hues swam beneath his eyes;
And he shrank with horror to see arise
Her clear face there, her singing smile. . . .
He dropped his brushes. This was vile.

He prayed and fasted. All night long
He knelt and prayed; until the song
Of birds in the cloister pierced his cell
With drowsy beams; and the matin bell.

All day he fasted, all day prayed.
Up and down, in the cloister's shade,
Slowly he walked, and did not see
How late sun sprinkled the blue yew tree.

Moonlight through the cell door came
And quivered its edges with pale blue flame.
But since the Christ had been betrayed
Was it enough that he fasted, prayed?
He took the thongs down from the shelf
And silent, in moonlight, scourged himself.

Said Brother Paul, 'Now what can ail
Our Brother Peter, who looks so pale?'
Slant eyes peered askance at him;
And sudden the columns reeled to swim—
They tilted and ran before his eyes
Low and brown along blue skies,
A flash of green, a gleam of white,
Paths and fountain. . . . Then came night.

They laid his body beside the pool,
Where the yew-tree shade spread blue and cool;
Into the spring they dipped their hands
Above the wavering pebbles and sands,
Lifted their eyes for Heaven's grace,
And bathed with silver the dreaming face.
They spoke in whispers, round him kneeling.
Lay brothers through the garden stealing,
Dropping spade or pruning-hook,
Came to the fountain-side, to look
With long and curious oxen-stare
At the body of Peter lying there.

An hour passed. And in the shade
Still he dreamed, while the Abbot prayed.
Bees in the Judas-blossoms clinging
Shook down petals, larks rose singing,
The noon was filled with bubbles of sound,
The pure sky dreamed, serene, profound.
And then at last his thin hands stirred,—

He raised his head, and spoke no word,
Looked round him with unknowing eyes,
And shrank, beneath too brilliant skies.
'Shall I be pardoned, Christ, for this?
I have betrayed you with a kiss.'
This, for the moment, was all he said,
And closed his eyes, and bent his head.

'I alone of the chosen few
Was not of Galilee, they knew.
And so they came at dusk to me,—
In the garden, by a purple tree.
Thirty pieces of silver there,
Thirty glints in the twilight air—
Thirty silver whispers spoken,—
Master, forgive! my vows were broken.

'I did not clearly know, I swear,
What thing it was I was doing there;
Nor did I guess from such soft breath,
That men like these could purpose death. . . .

'O Master! When we supped that night
On the bare board by candle-light,
I knew your great heart had divined
The venomous secret in my mind.
For when you drank, and broke the bread,
It was to me you turned your head
Saying, with grave eyes, quietly,
"When you do this, remember me."
I was confused; I knew my sin;
The Pharisees and Sanhedrin
Cried in my veins. And so I rose,
Too weak to tell you all, I chose
To do the thing I was bought to do;
I brought them, led them in to you,
I marked you with the unholy kiss.
And I was paid with coins for this.

'Staves shall blossom in scarlet flowers,
And all dumb mouths have singing powers;

There shall be wedding of dust and sea
Before my soul is given me . . .
They come in the night with staff and sword,
They have wried his hands with hempen cord;
Through filthy streets they jostle him;
And all grows faint, and all grows dim. . . .

'On Olivet we shrink. We see
The black procession to Calvary.
The soldiers sway with ripple of spears,
The trumpets cry, the rabble jeers.
Jesus is whipped for being slow,
The great cross pains his shoulder so.
Once he falls, though we hear no sound,
And lies unmoving on the ground;
And as he falls my soul falls too:
I am dazed, I know not what I do . . .
The little whip-lash flickers in sun,
My body feels the cool blood run,
The red welts ridge and sear my skin,
My eyes are blind with the blood of sin.
But a girl has lifted him a cup
He drinks, and again he staggers up.
I am spent with watching. I have no breath.
My body is stretched to verge of death.

'They have climbed the hill they call the Skull.
The crowd packs close. . . . Hollow and dull,
The ominous mallet-strokes resound.
He is stretched out silent on the ground.
Far off, we hear the brass nails driven;
The sullen echoes knock at heaven.
Far off, three crosses toss and rise
Black and little against the skies.
One faint voice wails agony—
It was a thief, it was not He.

'He writhes his head from side to side.
O holy Christ I have crucified!—
I twist there on the cross with you;
And what you suffer I suffer too. . . .

'Ravens gather: they blot the sun:
Out of the sky the light has run.
The orchards dim, the hill grows stark,
The earth rocks thrice in clamorous dark.
Great wheels rumble, and horses neigh;
Like mist the darkness rolls away. . . .
The sun breaks forth. The birds again
Sing, as after a shower of rain.

'Blue in the gulf the clear stream flows
Through humid gardens of lily and rose.
Above the gardens, in terraces,
Are almond-trees, then olive-trees;
Above them all one tree, alone,
Stands in the sky. The blossom blown
Purples the ground, and purples the bough.
And there Death sings in the blossoms now.

'I turn my back on Golgotha,
Where all my sinister sorrows are,—
And seek this blossoming leafless tree.
It shall forever be named for me.'

V

Twilight is spacious, near things in it seem far,
And distant things seem near.
Now in the green west hangs a yellow star;
And now across old waters you may hear
The profound gloom of bells among still trees,
Like a rolling of huge boulders beneath seas.

Peter said that Christ, though crucified,
Had not died;
But that escaping from his cerements,
In human flesh, with mortal sense,
Amazed at such an ending,
He fled alone, and hid in Galilee,
And lived in secret, spending
His days and nights, perplexed, in contemplation:
And did not know if this were surely he.

Did Peter tell me this? Or was I Peter?
Or did I listen to a tavern-story?
Green leaves thrust out and fall. It was long ago.
Dust has been heaped upon us. . . . We have perished.
We clamor again. And again we are dust and blow.

Well, let us take the music, and drift with it
Into the darkness. . . . It is exquisite.

PART V

I

As sometimes, in the playhouse,
While pizzicati shimmer, and lights are low,
And the hero pleads his love in the crude moonlight,
Or the villain staggers to shadows after a blow:
Suddenly through the quiet, from dark streets,
Through walls and doors a sound from the world is heard,
A shout, a piercing whistle, sharp and clear,
Or a horn, blown and echoing, or a loud cry,—
And the lovers and the blue moonlight seem absurd;
And the slow music, and the well-ordered words,
The flute-players with white hands, and the footlights, seem
Unreal and soundless as a dream:
So, as I follow silently through my mind
The devious paths that wind
Among old forests lamia-haunted,
Through silences enchanted,
Or into the glare and sound and vibrant dust
Of labyrinthine cities, among pale faces,
Among the glidings of uncounted eyes,
Wearing the fire of love, the tinsel of lust,
Singing in music, or uttering cries;
Dying in garrets to the slow tick of clocks;
Swinging in gaslit cellars from knotted ropes;
Catching with claws at illusory hopes;
Lying with perfumed harlots or picking locks;—
Measuring out the intolerable hours

In the strange secret hearts of those unknown,
To dive to slimy pavements from high towers,
Or walk abroad in the light of the stars, alone,—

So, in an instant, through this silent dream,
Sounds from the real world break,—
Suddenly I awake,
And hear familiar voices, just as though
I had dozed a second and missed a word or two.

I see the familiar street-lamps gleam,
Or find myself sitting, as long ago,
In the same café among the people I knew,—
With the same coffee before me, and between my fingers
The same slow cigarette consuming in smoke:
And in my ears an echo of music lingers,
And the sound of a dying sentence that someone spoke.

And I am amazed, I do not know
If this is I, who drink vermouth,
Or whether that was I who rode the air.
I fell to an outspread net; I stabbed my lover;
I kissed a vampire's hair. . . .

Dreams, in the mind, move silently to and fro
As winds through the clear sky blow,—
I do not guess
Whence they come or whither they go.
A soft air, like a music, divides the smoke,—
The lazily shifting smoke of the cigarettes,—
We follow upon it; and the tired heart forgets. . . .

Once I must have loved, for I remember
Seeing her white face, and the clear green eyes . . .
I followed her through the slanting silver of rain;
I followed the sound of her breathing through the darkness;
Till at last, and suddenly, she dissolved in the sunlight,
I was engulfed in a dazzle of silent skies.

Once, I stood by a curbstone in the moonlight,
A carriage stopped, a face leaned out;

The carriage was silvered and ghostly in the moonlight.
We sat together talking in intimate darkness,
The wheels murmured, the hooves beat;
Together we echoed alone down an infinite street.
And as the street-lamps slanted across her eyes,
And swam into darkness again through spear-like shadows,
She was shy, she laughed. . . . But that was long ago.
And when I left her, or why, or who she was,
I never shall know.

I have climbed stairs with a candle between my palms
To seek the eternal secret behind a door.
I have struck matches and seen serene white faces.
Once in the darkness I heard her singing,
And followed the music into her heart;
Sometimes, I have found delight in secret places . . .
But ever I turn and turn, with my turning shadow,
Ever like smoke I am blown and spread and die,
Dissolved in the speckless brilliance of a sky . . .

Well, no matter; I die, but all dies with me;
The world reels out into silence;
The darkness of death comes suddenly over the sun.

II

Rhythms there are that take the blood with magic,
Smoothing it out in silver;
Rhythms there are that die in the brain's dark chambers
Like a blowing fragrance.
Whose voice is this, so filling the darkness,
Making the stars so bright?
Who is it that dances before us through the night?
Yet through these rhythms laughter is always breaking,
We dream our dreams, but dream forever waking,
The elfin horns are silenced, the mouths we kissed
Are blown aside like mist.

Isolda, leaning among her coffee-cups,
Smiles to me.

Helen of Sparta, bearing a silver tray,
Laughs at me.

Isolda, I will meet you to-night in the moonlight
And praise your golden hair.

Helen, I will walk with you by the sea-waves
And kiss you there.

One leaned down from a balcony sweet with jasmine
To blow her kiss to me.

One over cobwebs danced in the cold of the moon.

One came late by the dark of a city wall.

By the dust of a new-made grave, one came too soon.

Fall, rhythms! Die, music! My lovers betray me—

They kiss me, and sing, but their brothers are creeping to slay me.

A darkness is in their eyes, foreboding death.

They have conspired with silence to suck my breath.

One ran into the pinewood, calling me after
With a wave of her hand:

One, with a soft hypocritical laughter,
Slid through the lips of the sand.

One ran lightly up silver ladders of rain;
I never saw her again.

Fall, rhythms! Die, music! For always, in moonlight,

Soon as I start to praise, and she to love,

The moonlight is shattered, the petals are blown away.

Darkness whistles between us, the music shudders,

The enchantment passes, the audience rises,

The curtain falls, the musicians cease to play . . .

And once more I must go,

As I have gone before a thousand times,

To a little dingy room: and light the gas

And read the evening paper; or at the window,

Observe the old moon, shining upon the rooftops;

Or watch, in the street, the lonely harlots pass . . .

III

The astrologer's red face slowly turned towards me
Against a blackboard figured with horoscopes;
An old man nodded; a woman sighed.
'Now here's a little blue-eyed girl in Virgo,
Loved by a syphilitic, twice her age . . .'
Among the ghostly stars a whisper died.

And as one walking down a corridor
Towards a lamplit mirror
Sees his own body, remote and small and dim,
Insubstantial and vague, come slowly nearer,
With equal steps, and fixed eyes always clearer,
Until at last it sharply faces him,—
So, in the darkness of that air,
He slowly became aware
That it was he who lay upon the bed
With a pillow beneath his head:
He suddenly faced his own identity,
He knew himself, grown old and tired and ill,
And saw the white spread flowing away in darkness,
Or into infinity.

He was tired: he wished to die.
If one could only, by an act of will,
Stop the sick heart forever! If one could only
Shake off this hideous sickness, like a dream!—
He was exhausted by thick vertigo:
Weary in every nerve, in every vein,
Of slow, exact, mechanical, measured steps.
The heights of curbstones stretched his chin to heaven.
The widths of puddles wedged his brain apart.
And he was compelled, even with eyes wide open,
To fight his way through a jeering darkness,
To calculate on suddenly spreading oceans,
Scale monstrous cliffs of curbstone with one step:
And always, at the moment of his achievement,
Unwarily, he raised his eyes,—
Raised them, one second, from the relentless ground,—
And, suddenly, he went crashing down in chaos . . .

It was a pity if one who, like himself,
Clung with his naked nerves to the edge of the gulf,
Could not so rest his eyes on a little flower! . . .

It was a pity if a black wind must come
And blow it away from him.

It was a pity, if, by some harsh enchantment,
Like some rank fog from the envious heart of the world,
A ladderless wall should silently rise between them.

It was true she was young, it was true he was twice her age,
It was true she was pretty, and not yet disillusioned,
That he was sick and old and might soon die,—
But because in his youth the fire of life had seared him,—
Was that a reason that all should be denied him?
Was that a reason the gods thought adequate?
No, not for this!—

She came, then, through the corridors of his brain,
Walking into a chamber large and fair;
Her feet made music over the floors of his brain,
She exhaled a coolness and a fragrance there;
She walked forever through the chambers of his brain,
With young blue eyes, white face, and yellow hair.

Why had the harlot been so importunate?
Why, against his will,
Had he so weakly consented to go with her?
He must have been tired, that night, he must have been lonely,
He must have been lonely and tired, or he'd never have done
it . . .

She was lean and ugly, and vulgar in every fibre,
Her eyes were shallow and hard, her face was powdered,
She spat between kisses . . . And soon as their love was over
She left him to walk the streets.

And now the whole sick world in the nauseous darkness
Sprawled like a harlot's body, diseased and old;
And the darkness in which he struggled,
Seemed like the harlot's hair.
And as he tossed and turned and closed his eyes
He saw her horrible face before him rise,
Her lean red mouth, her pale consumptive cheeks:

He saw her lips just opening for a smile,
Malicious and slow and vile . . .
Wherever he turned, her face was there,
She smiled, and raised blue elbows to comb her hair.

And all this torture for that ambiguous pleasure!
And to be told he must not slake his fever
In the cool stream that sang before his feet!
That he must reel forever and grasp at nothing,
Dragged to a vortex on waves of oily heat! . . .

Beyond this darkness, beyond this yellow darkness,
No doubt there was a world in which men laughed,
In which the grass was dusted blue with dew-fall.
No doubt there was a world in which girls sang,
And waited for their lovers to come by moonlight . . .
But was it not for him? . . .

She came, then, through the corridors of his brain,
Walking into a chamber large and fair:
Her feet made music over the floors of his brain;
She exhaled a coolness, she exhaled a fragrance there:
She walked forever through the chambers of his brain;
With young blue eyes, pale face, and yellow hair.
And he remembered, with peace, that she had said
She loved him. . . . But would she love him when he was dead?

The astrologer's red face slowly turned towards me
Against a blackboard scrolled with horoscopes,
An old man nodded, a woman sighed.
'Now here's a little blue-eyed girl in Virgo . . .
Loved by a syphilitic . . . ' A ghostly whisper
Floated among his deathless stars, and died.

IV

You say, before the music starts, while still
Cacophonies of tuning drawl and mutter,—
Snarls of horns and cries of violins,—
That so-and-so has just divorced his wife,
That Paul is dead, leaving his work unfinished,—

And what's-her-name was hurried, secretly,
To an asylum . . . What says the music, then? . . .

Winds pour from the chattering south,
Warm foam crumbles along lava beaches,
Parrots are screeching green
In a sky of smouldering blue.
Dull broad leaves struggle against the sun.
And I am there, and you. . . .

You say, the time has come to make decisions,—
Question and vacillation must be ended:
Life is too short, and one must choose his way.
Laura was right in breaking her engagement.
They were all foolish to gossip as they did . . .
And wasn't it strange—

Shell-roads glare and shimmer,
Heat is trembling on scarlet rooftops,
Bland leaves stealthily creep and stare.
Let us go up among the pinewoods,
Let us go up the wind, it is cooler there;
Let us go slowly along hot yellow beaches
To where the blue pinewoods lead us upward . . .

No, it was not good taste, to say the least . . .
So soon! With spring grass not yet sharp above him!—
And Helen said . . . And Beatrice said . . .

Sunlight tempers how subtly into moonlight!
Gold to silver, an alchemy of sound;
Rose to silence. . . . And here we dream.
Green clouds slowly sway and revolve above us,
Blue clouds dilate and suddenly vanish,
Gold stars are swallowed or gleam.
Under these moving arches like ghosts we seem!
Are we real, or must we perish?—
We blow in the air, like leaves our words are blown . . .
Did you hear what I said? . . .
I said that I loved you, that we are alone . . .
A rushing of green clouds scatters the stars overhead,

A roar of waves has scattered my words.
I am running, silent, through nets of shadows,
I am caught in the shadows of branches,
I follow your face, but now it has paled and gone,
Like a ghostly reflection of the running moon . . .

As for friendship, you say,—can women know it?
No! it is always love, with women, or nothing . . .
There, you can see her now—she's turned her head:
And that's the latest way to arrange your hair.

Moonlight spreads how gorgeously into sunlight!
Blue rocks bask in the sun,
Dragon flies weave shuttles of blue through gold,
Up the green hill we run,
And lie in the dazzle, and watch the clouds
Swim in intense deep blue,
Dissolving, streaming, amassing coldly . . .
Golden is noon; golden are you;
Black bees cling and balance in goldenrod;
You laugh in the low-voiced grass,
Watching with lazy sun-filled eyes
Silent eternity streamed in the blue above you . . .
And you do not hear the blood in my brain that cries,
'I love you, I love you, I love you! . . .

You say, that cello-player, with the black eyes,
Wrote music once, conducted symphonies,
Had great ambitions . . . He drank himself to this.
Poor fellow! Is that true?—And so good-looking!

V

Music from concertinas in an alley,
Tinkle of glasses through a swinging door,
And cats with cold green eyes:
I have seen it all a thousand times before.
A thousand nights have died as this night dies . . .
Take my arm, and come along with me.
We'll spend this night contentedly.
When the book is opened just put down—

Oh, any names, it doesn't matter! . . .
They ask no questions there; they know me there;
And follow me up the stair . . .

Take my arm! You aren't afraid of me? . . .
You wouldn't want to leave me,—would you dear?
Isn't it sweet, this warm June evening air!
This is the place, right here. . . .

Turn the lights out. . . . No? You want to see me?
Well, all right. Aren't you funny, though!
My hair is short because I've had a fever,—
It's just begun to grow.
That's a hair-net—haven't you ever seen one?
Haven't you ever loved a girl before?
Lovely! I never thought my breasts were lovely!—
This is a ring my father wore.

Most men—they're so indifferent; but you,—
You like me, don't you. You're so nice to me.
You look at me, somehow, as if you loved me. . . .
Dear, take me with you somewhere by the sea.
We'll go in swimming and lie on the beach together,
And love each other all night through.
All I need is a pair of gloves,—and a feather
To trim my hat with, green or blue.

Your hands, touching my face, stroking my forehead,—
What is it they remind me of?
All sorts of things when I was young and little;
And the first time I fell in love. . . .
Kiss me, dear. You kiss me as if you meant it.
Keep the ring to remember me by.
Don't forget to write me. Turn the lights out.
Soon as you've left, I'm going to sleep,—or try. . . .

Now you've gone. And I'm alone once more,
Staring against the darkness;
As I have stared a thousand times before.
You walk through lonely streets in quiet moonlight.
You'll throw away the worthless ring I wore.

Where are you going? What will you see to-morrow?
 Who will your lovers be?
 How long,—I wonder,—will you remember me? . . .

.
 Music from concertinas in an alley,
 And cats with slow green eyes,—
 A thousand nights have died as this night dies.
 The stars dance out, the air blows warm to-night,
 The girls are all in white.
 Bargains are struck, they laugh, they glide away,
 Some to love and some to lust.
 In smoky lounges tired musicians play.
 The harlot's slippers are grey with dust. . . .

And now we turn towards a depth of sleep,
 Tired of music, of lamps and cigarettes,
 Tired of fevered faces.
 Now let us seek a solitude, and rest
 In dark and quiet places.

Let us go in through labyrinthine darkness
 Seeking the strange cool secret of ourselves,
 To stretch ourselves in soundless shadow, and sleep.
 Let us go in through labyrinthine darkness.
 Wind whistles. We are falling. The night is deep.

Who am I? Am I he that loved and murdered?
 Who walked in sunlight, heard a music playing?
 Or saw a pigeon tumbling down a wall?
 Someone drowned in the cold floods of my heart.
 Someone fell to a net—I saw him fall.

I have run in through earth and out again,
 I have been under seas, among hot stars;
 My eyes are dazzled; my feet are tired.
 Someone hated me, and pursued, and killed me.
 For a million years my body has been desired.

Tired of change, I seek the unmoving centre—

But is it moveless,—or are all things turning?
Great wheels revolve. I fall among them and die.
My veins are streets. Millions of men rush through them.
Which, in this terrible multitude, is I?

I hurry to him, I plunge through jostling darkness,
I think I see his face—
He's gone. And a sinister stranger leers at me.
Countless eyes of strangers are turned toward me.
Who's this that all our eyes are turned to see?

We look at him, but suddenly he has vanished,
We turn in the darkness, we murmur at one another,
We snarl with hatred, we strike, we kill, we run.
We whirl in the silence, become a soundless vortex.
We lift our idiot faces to the sun.
We flow together; we rage, we shout, we sing;
Pour and engulf; recoil, disgorge, and spring.

VI

The walls of all the city are rolled away;
And suddenly all the lighted rooms are bare,
Numberless gas-jets flare,
Thousands of secret lives, with unconcern,
Yawn and turn.
Men in their shirtsleeves reading papers,
Women by mirrors combing out their hair,
Women sleeping, old men dying,
The furtive lover half way up the stair;
And in tumultuous cabarets
And music-filled cafés,
Dancers among white tables slowly turning,
Face fixed on face with passionate yearning,
Following ever the interwreathing beat
With spellbound feet.
The old violinist, with white hair,
Leaves his music, tosses his arms in the air,
Snaps his fingers and sings;
Maenad maidens in bacchanalian dance
Follow as in a trance

With heads thrown back, shut eyes, and yearning throats
The menacing mournful notes.

The young man drinks and leans across the table,
Through clamor of music and hurrying feet

Desperate to repeat

What she, who lowers her eyes, has heard before;

And across his shoulder, while he has turned away,

She smiles to her lover who smiles beside the door. . . .

Darkness desends, more walls are rolled away. . . .

Sudden, they lower the curtain on the play. . . .

A chorus-girl has fainted before the footlights;

She is hurried off, her child is born and dies,

In a hotel bedroom white and weak she lies,

While chorus-girls about her giggle and joke

And the young men smoke,

And all are asking, 'Who was the father, dear?

No one will hear!—

The sky above grows suddenly coppery red,

Sparks and smoke go up across the stars,

Wheels rumble, the men rush out of bars

To see great horses pass.

Thick flames burst from the windows and spout up walls,

The firemen's faces are white in the ghastly light,

A ladder is raised, up it a fireman crawls;

And suddenly with a roar the ladder falls

With the falling housefront into a storm of fire,

And the crowd shrieks, and presses back from the heat,

And the twisted flame spouts higher . . .

A woman had started to carry her child downstairs,

She was driven back by a gust of flame in her face,

They lay on the scorching floor to escape the smoke,

The child at last ceased crying,

She knew that her child was dead, that she herself was dying. . . .

Peal, bells! Crash, walls! . . .

Into the quiet darkness at last it falls. . . .

Policemen loiter along their beats

Through deserted streets.

And now, while the houses sleep,

The burglars scale the moonlit walls, or creep
 Up cobbled alleys; doors are quietly forced,
 Panes are cut and tapped, to fall with a chime,
 Fitfully flits and falls
 The nervous arc of light on floors and walls.
 Safes are drilled, silver turns and glistens,
 A whistle is blown, the night falls suddenly still,
 Sweating the marauder listens,
 Glides to the window-sill,
 And under the watchful stars, at last, is gone.
 And then over glimmering walls and waking streets,
 Among grey ash-cans, creeping to numberless rooms,
 Comes the cold soulless dawn.

VIII

Time. . . . Time. . . . Time. . . .
 And through the immortal silence we may hear
 The choral stars like great clocks tick and chime.
 Destiny, with inquisitorial eye,
 Regards the jewelled movement of the sky.
 And there alone, in a little lamplit room,
 Immortal, changeless, in a changeless dream,
 Forslin sits and meditates; and hears
 The hurrying days go down to join the years.

In the evening, as the lamps are lighted,
 Sitting alone in his strange world,
 He meditates; and through his musing hears
 The tired footfalls of the dying day
 Monotonously ebb and ebb away
 Into the smouldering west;
 And hears the dark world slowly come to rest.
 Now, as the real world dwindles and grows dim,
 His dreams come back to him:
 Now, as one who stands
 In the aquarium's gloom, by creeping sands,
 Watching the glide of fish beneath pale bubbles,
 The bubbles briefly streaming,
 Cold and white and green, poured in silver.—
 He does not know if this is wake or dreaming;
 But thinks to lean, reach out his hands, and swim. . . .

The music weaves about him, gold and silver;
The music chatters, the music sings,
The music sinks and dies.
Who dies, who lives? What leaves remain forever?
Who knows the secret of the immortal springs?
Who laughs, who kills, who cries?

We hold them all, they walk our dreams forever,
Nothing perishes in that haunted air,
Nothing but is immortal there.
And we ourselves, dying with all our worlds,
Will only pass the ghostly portal
Into another's dream; and so live on
Through dream to dream, immortal.

WHITE NOCTURNE

I

The first soft snowflakes hovering down the night,
From one white cloud that hurries beneath the stars,
Whispering over the black unfrozen pool,
Silently falling on withered leaves,
Eddying slowly among bare boughs of trees,—
The music you are to me is as ghostly as these,
Softly falling, softly passing;
The first soft snowflakes slanting down this night
Melt on the lifted palms of your hands;
One of them finds your lip, and you quietly laugh,
A laugh that means to say
‘This was the kiss you gave me yesterday,
Or the ghost of it—ah yes, the ghost of it,
For the ghost of it is all we have to-day.’
The first slow snowflakes pass
Leaving a sprinkled whiteness on leaves and grass,
The cloud turns ghostlike against the cold bright stars,
Over the long black boughs that seem to reach
Forlornly after it,

And now it is gone, and suddenly we seem
To walk in silence where before we walked in speech.
But the silence itself is exquisite,
Like a pause in music, ghostly with overtones,
And, silent, we seem to hear
The echoes of words we spoke and heard last year.
Clearly our footsteps sound on the moistened stones,
Clearly the lamplit hill-street gleams before us;
And silently we climb,
Climbing our tragic destiny together,
From lamp to lamp up the bright street of time.

II

You sit beneath the lamp and talk to me,
With dark hair somehow turned to fire,
Your white hands lie in your lap, or touch your lips,
And your talk, like music, weaving intricately,
Plays upon me. It is a magic of white
Touching and changing all familiar things;
It flows in the windy night,
It quietly opens secret doors, it sings,
It returns upon itself, repeats, denies,
Or takes sweet pleasure in silence. And all the while
You sit beneath the lamp, and smile,
Or turn away your eyes.
'We remember,' you seem to say,—
Choosing strange words to say it, in another way,—
'How slowly and how inevitably we change,
How what was then familiar now grows strange.'
White valleys fall between us,
Your words become a wind, and heavily blow,
We seem to be crying across a chasm of snow,
Trying to hear the half-remembered words,
Trying to guess what we no longer know.
Yes, life changes, we are never the same.
Your eyes grow dark with a tiny flame,
You say the words, and wait;
And a terror seizes me, for I fear
That you have divined the things that I have forgotten,
Things that still shine before you white and clear.

Yes, it is strange. You sigh, your talk flows on,
You touch your hair with your hands, and sigh,
And suddenly it seems to me that this word,
This word so quietly said, was a terrible cry.
And I am confused, I desire to touch your hand,
But again white chasms open, the night flows chill,
And something freezes within me, and I am still.

III

The snowflakes tick the frosted windowpane,
The night is mad with the senseless dance of flakes,
The coal fire sinks and shakes;
I wait by the window, and look along the street,
To where in the snow, beneath a lamp,
A man and a woman stand:
He is leaning close to her face, he takes her hand,
He pleads with her, she tries to turn away.
What is it he leans to say?
What is the savage music he plays upon her?
What chords profound with memories?
She lifts her face in the sombre light,
And together, slowly, they walk away
Whirled about by the mad dance of snow;
Down the white silent street from lamp to lamp they go,
Into the immortal night.
Where have they gone? Where will the white streets lead them?
To what tempestuous or ignoble end?
To what faint peace, or dazzling pain?
The snowflakes whirl and madden my brain,
They whirl in patterns before my eyes.
And I see them at last in a small and sombre room,
In the yellow lamplight I see them rise;
She smiles, and lifts white hands to touch her hair:
And he waits wearily in the eternal chair.

IV

I would like to touch this snow with the wind of a dream,
And turn it all
To petals of roses. Why is it that I recall

Your two pale hands holding a bowl of roses,
Wide open like lotos flowers, floating in water?
I would like to touch this snow with the wind of a dream;
To hold the world in my hands and let it fall.
We have walked together through snow for a long long way,
We have walked among the hills immortally white,
Golden by noon and blue by night.
I would like to touch this snow with the wind of a dream:
And hear you singing again by a starlight wall.

V

You talk to me—what is it that you are saying?
April . . . April . . . the soft sun falls between,
The deep white chasm, the gorge of the frozen river,
Flashes with white and green;
And we are walking there by the blue river,
By the blue river scaled with golden fire,
Our feet move pace for pace through the tall grasses,
And the earth is light with desire.
A great cloud crosses the sky,
Wind shakes the leaves, you fall in the grass and cry;
Crying silently, hiding your face with your hands;
And you are crying, I know,
Because this day, this youth, this beauty, must go,
Go down into the dust.
The golden river is dark with a sudden gust,
The green of the willows is ruffled grey,
A great cloud crosses the sky,
Wind shakes the leaves, you fall in the grass and cry.
Youth . . . April . . . we clamour to them to stay,
And a shadow is on us, for we know that love must die.
And rising, then, we see white peaks in the distance.
White peaks. Quiet. Peace. Eternity.

VI

Yes, we have changed, slowly and silently changed;
We are the hungry ghosts of the selves we knew;
We sit on each other's tombs and stare at death,
We scarcely believe it true,—

And only then with a pang that is almost a cry,—
 That once, long ago, we were the 'I' and the 'you'
 Who stood bewildered under an April sky.
 White night of snow, and a thousand nights like this;
 Snow on our lips like the ghost of a kiss;
 And a thousand nights in a hollow second of time
 We will return again,
 Silently, or with trivial speech, to climb
 From lamp to lamp up the white street of pain.
 Yet, is it better, (you say,
 Painfully turning your darkened eyes away,)
 To lend our souls to a quieter music at last,—
 Remembering, when we will,
 The sudden and gorgeous clashing of the past? . . .
 Snow falls about us, the hills immortally white
 Wait far off in the undisturbing night.

VARIATIONS

[1916]

I

The moon distills a soft blue light,
 The moon distills a silence.
 Black clouds huddle across the stars;
 I walk in deserted gardens
 Breaking the dry leaves under my feet . . .
 Leaves have littered the marble seat
 Where the lovers sat in silence . . .
 Leaves have littered the empty seat . . .

Down there the black pool, quiveringly,
 Ripples the floating moon . . .
 Down there the tall trees, restlessly,
 Shake beneath the moon . . .

Beloved, I walk alone . . .
What ghost is this that walks with me,
Always in darkness walks with me?

II

Green light, from the moon,
Pours over the dark blue trees,
Green light from the autumn moon
Pours on the grass . . .
Green light falls on the goblin fountain
Where hesitant lovers meet and pass.

They laugh in the moonlight, touching hands,
They move like leaves on the wind . . .
I remember an autumn night like this,
And not so long ago,
When other lovers were blown like leaves,
Before the coming of snow.

III

Wind in the sunlit trees, and the red leaves fall:
Shadows of leaves on the sunlit wall.
Wind in the turning tops of the trees . . .
I am reminded, seeing these,
Of an afternoon, and you
Making the trees more scarlet, the sky more blue.

IV

Here alone, unknown, in the darkness,
I watch you whirling above your shadow,
Soft in saffron, with dark hair jewelled,
And arms uplifted,

Dancing alone in the hissing spotlight . . .
You rise and fall on the wave of the music
Narrowing eyes at the light that dazzles,
Languidly smiling . . .

Beautiful, now, are your cold white shoulders . . .
If I were death, my hands might touch them;
If I were death, my mouth might kiss you,
Passionate dancer.

V

From the cold fountain's sunlit lip
A shining film of water spreads,
It is shot with sun, it is blue and gold . . .
It scatters jewels to wet the grass,
And children watch it with lifted heads,
And the young girls pause there as they pass . . .
A sparrow sits at the edge, and flings
The vanishing jewels with his wings.

VI

You are as beautiful as white clouds
Flowing among bright stars at night:
You are as beautiful as pale clouds
Which the moon sets alight.

You are as lovely as golden stars
Which white clouds try to brush away:
You are as bright as golden stars
When they come out to play.

You are as glittering as those stairs
Of stone down which the blue brooks run:
You are as shining as sea-waves
All hastening to the sun.

VII

Red leaf, red leaf, falling to float
On the blue water among the cold clouds,
If I were a child I would call you a boat
And sail to the moon . . .

I would sail to the moon with the dark king's daughter,
The beautiful dreamer with green-slippered feet;
Her long golden hair would shine on the water;
Her eyes would be blue;

And there she would sing, while the sail overhead
Swelled with the wind, and the green waves flashed,—
Her red lips would sing, till the isle of the dead
Rose darkly before us.

VIII

In the mazes of loitering people, the watchful and furtive,
The shadows of tree-trunks and shadows of leaves,
In the drowse of the sunlight, among the low voices,
I suddenly face you,

Your dark eyes return for a space from her who is with you,
They shine into mine with a sunlit desire,
They say an 'I love you, what star do you live on?'
They smile and then darken,

And silent I answer 'You too—I have known you,—I love you!'—
And the shadows of tree-trunks and shadows of leaves
Interlace with low voices and footsteps and sunlight
To divide us forever.

IX

Moonlight, and shadows of leaves
On the white wall above me—
The shadows gallop and swirl without sound.
Blue moonlight, brief shadows of leaves,
And once more I see you:
Saying aloud, like a dreamer, 'You love me,
You love me!'

Moonlight . . . down there in the garden,
I know without seeing,
The somnolent fountain is filled with blue fire.
I close my eyes, I pursue you

Through dream's fainter moonlight,
Ghostlike, with shadows of dead leaves, silently
Fleeing.

X

Queen Cleopatra, now grown old,
Watched the green grass turning brown . . .
The river is shrunk to half its size:
Now I will lay me down.

Queen Cleopatra called her slaves
And peered in the mirror with age-pearled eyes;
My lips are not so red as they were:
Not so the old leaf dies!

Light the torches, and fill the courts
With scarlet music, and bring to me
Vermilion to smear upon my lips,
And opals, that I may be

Once more what Cleopatra was
Before the woman became the queen . . .
She laughed, and backward tossed her head;
And horn, and tambourine,

Snarled at the hot and red-starred night,
While gasping dancers, one by one,
Whirled on the stone with yellow feet . . .
And when that dance was done

She poured cold poison into a cup
And watched the thick foam wink and scethe:
One black bubble upon her tongue
And she would cease to breathe.

She held the poison before her mouth . . .
And saw the dark tomb hewed in stone
Where a thousand nights would drift as one,
And she would sleep alone;

And lightly touched the goblet's rim,
And thought, with a pleased and narrowed eye,
Of this and that, and Antony,
And the laugh that will not die.

XI

This night I dreamed that you shone before me
Colder and paler than rose-flushed marble,
With dark hair fallen across your shoulders
And face half hidden.

And in that darkness I went before you
And turned my eyes from your beauty quickly:
I turned away from your too great beauty,
I fled before you.

Now I remember how in that shadow
You started to smile, your dark eyes kindled,
Your face grew light with a word unspoken;
Then, had I waited,

I should have learned . . . what moonlight secret?
What whisper of temples and hills of cypress?
What echo of singing and far-off cymbals,
Gleam of the goddess? . . .

But I, grown base in fear of denial,
Though all my blood stood still for your beauty,
I turned in silence away from your kindness;
And now I have lost you.

XII

Wind, wind, wind in the old trees,
Whispering prophecies all night long . . .
What do the grey leaves sing to the wind,
What do they say in their whispered song?

We were all young once, and green as the sea,
We all loved beauty, the maiden of white.

But now we are old. O wind, have mercy
And let us remember our youth this night!

The wind is persuasive, it turns through the trees
And sighs of a miracle under its breath.
Beauty the dream will die with the dreamer,
None shall have mercy, but all shall have death.

XIII

Blue waves are driven by wind,
The leaves are driven,
And the clouds go hurrying dizzily over the sky.
Among the blown leaves he stands, and lifts his flute,
And trembles, and blows strange melody at the sky.
The music he plays is old blown leaves,
The notes are unevenly blown.
Sometimes it sings, sometimes it grieves,
Sometimes a querulous monotone . . .
What does he see above red rooftops,
What does he see when he lifts his eyes?
Pale leaves loosened from bare black elm-boughs,
Pale leaves hurled from the hurrying skies,
Death . . . death . . . death . . . death . . .
Beauty singing for beauty that dies.
Love was betrayed in the whispering garden:
Clear as white flame the maiden fled.
A shaft of moonlight dazzled the somnolent garden;
And among the white leaves love lay dead . . .
Pale waves are driven to foam,
And the leaves are driven;
Among the blown leaves he wavers and lifts his flute.
Dust will cover the golden leaves of the maple,
The querulous praise will soon be mute.

XIV

Beautiful body made of ivory,
Beautiful body made of ivory and roses,
Beautiful body made of gold and beaten silver,
Garlanded with ivy,

Colder than starlight you stand and await me,
Colder than starlight on the snow of mountains;
Whiter than starlight on the snow of oceans
You wait and are silent.

Beautiful dreamer of dreams,
Beautiful dreamer of cold-hearted music,
Roseate dreamer of involuted music,
Chords of tense silver,

Clearly you sound to me in the night-time;
Solemnly, like a rich wind moving,
You move in my heart's enchanted forests,
You sigh and are restless.

Beautiful dream of the dreamer,
Rare dream profoundly and curiously unfolding,
Unfolding like a lotus in waves of cool fragrance,
Unfolding in slow measure,

You are like moonlight prodigally unfolding,
You are like the universe of stars unfolding,
Unfolding in slow chords of sound and silence,
Grave and immortal.

Beautiful body made of roses,
Beautiful body made of roses and sea-waves,
Beautiful body with eyes of cold starlight,
Slow-moving dreamer,

Beautiful woman made of love,
White body made of dreamdust and stardust,
Silently and sedately you enter me,—
Quietly you possess me.

XV

The sea falls all night on the yellow sand,
The green waves foam and thrust and slide,
The long green waves fall on the yellow sand,
All night long they fall,

The green waves fall and drag at the yellow pebbles,
The shingle roars in the sliding surf,
Wind screams over the long volutes of foam,
All night long they whirl,

They charge the sand and seethe and slide in laughter,
Swiftly withdraw and murmur and rise,
They charge the sand with rippling glittering edges,
All night long they charge,

Immortally flinging their long green bodies to death,
Immortally baffled, withdrawing, crying,
Rallying, hurrying, clamoring, sobbing for rest,
Immortally slaying, immortally dying.

XVI

Against an orange twilight sky
The street lamp gleams like clearer fire,
The cold wind spills the huddling leaves,
And cold bells, in the sombre spire,
Shake the wind with a savage sound . . .
The street lamp gleams like a golden eye.

This dust will be possessed of tongues,
These leaves will find a million voices,
These stones will murmur and seize our feet,
These boughs of trees will writhe and beat . . .
Against an orange twilight sky
The street lamp burns like a golden eye.

The earth's edge, growing black, swings up
With sinister and enormous arc,
The yellow star that came to swim
Silently in the golden sky
Is caught and crushed by that black rim . . .
The street lamp gleams like an evil eye.

XVII

Tear the pink rose petal by petal
And let the petals float and fall,

Ravel the golden stamens out,
And last of all,

Shredding its sweetness on the wind,
Turn and laugh and go away,
Forgetting how soft a thing it was,
How brief a thing to stay.

But when white winds have swept your heart
And white tides driven along your veins,
And the continents are yellow with leaves
And the mountains black with rains,

Secretly in your depths of sleep
Among the unresting rocks and roots
A dream, a gleam, a warmth will start,
A whorl of winds and lutes,

And thrusting among the withered leaves
Will burn the purple-pointed flame,
And the rose you slew will light again,
Will light again the same.

XVIII

The sun distills a golden light,
The sun distills a silence.
White clouds dazzle across the sky:
I walk in the blowing garden
Breaking the gay leaves under my feet . . .
Leaves have littered the marble seat
Where the lovers sat in silence:
Leaves have littered the empty seat.

Down there the blue pool, quiveringly,
Ripples the fire of the sun;
Down there the tall tree, restlessly,
Shivers beneath the sun.
Beloved, I walk alone . . .
What dream is this that sings with me,
Always in sunlight sings with me?

Out there the blue sea, glimmeringly,
Ripples among the dunes.
Blue waves streaked and chained with fire
Rustle among the dunes.

The sea-gull spreads his wings
Dizzily over the foam to skim,
And an azure shadow speeds with him.
The sea-gull folds his wings
To fall from depth to depth of air
And finds sky everywhere.

THE HOUSE OF DUST

PART I

I

The sun goes down in a cold pale flare of light.
The trees grow dark: the shadows lean to the east:
And lights wink out through the windows, one by one.
A clamor of frosty sirens mourns at the night.
Pale slate-grey clouds whirl up from the sunken sun.

And the wandering one, the inquisitive dreamer of dreams,
The eternal asker of answers, stands in the street,
And lifts his palms for the first cold ghost of rain.
The purple lights leap down the hill before him.
The gorgeous night has begun again.

'I will ask them all, I will ask them all their dreams,
I will hold my light above them and seek their faces.
I will hear them whisper, invisible in their veins . . .'
The eternal asker of answers becomes as the darkness,
Or as a wind blown over a myriad forest,
Or as the numberless voices of long-drawn rains

We hear him and take him among us, like a wind of music,
Like the ghost of a music we have somewhere heard;
We crowd through the streets in a dazzle of pallid lamplight,
We pour in a sinister wave, ascend a stair,
With laughter and cry, and word upon murmured word;
We flow, we descend, we turn . . . and the eternal dreamer
Moves among us like light, like evening air . . .

Good-night! Good-night! Good-night! We go our ways,
The rain runs over the pavement before our feet,
The cold rain falls, the rain sings.
We walk, we run, we ride. We turn our faces
To what the eternal evening brings.

Our hands are hot and raw with the stones we have laid,
We have built a tower of stone high into the sky,
We have built a city of towers.
Our hands are light, they are singing with emptiness.
Our souls are light; they have shaken a burden of hours . . .
What did we build it for? Was it all a dream? . . .
Ghostly above us in lamplight the towers gleam . . .
And after a while they will fall to dust and rain;
Or else we will tear them down with impatient hands;
And hew rock out of the earth, and build them again.

II

One, from his high bright window in a tower,
Leans out, as evening falls,
And sees the advancing curtain of the shower
Splashing its silver on roofs and walls:
Sees how, swift as a shadow, it crosses the city,
And murmurs beyond far walls to the sea,
Leaving a glimmer of water in the dark canyons,
And silver falling from eave and tree.

One, from his high bright window, looking down,
Peers like a dreamer over the rain-bright town,
And thinks its towers are like a dream.
The western windows flame in the sun's last flare,
Pale roofs begin to gleam.

Looking down from a window high in a wall
He sees us all;
Lifting our pallid faces towards the rain,
Searching the sky, and going our ways again,
Standing in doorways, waiting under the trees . . .
There, in the high bright window he dreams, and sees
What we are blind to,—we who mass and crowd
From wall to wall in the darkening of a cloud.

The gulls drift slowly above the city of towers,
Over the roofs to the darkening sea they fly;
Night falls swiftly on an evening of rain.
The yellow lamps wink one by one again.
The towers reach higher and blacker against the sky.

III

One, where the pale sea foamed at the yellow sand,
With wave upon slowly shattering wave,
Turned to the city of towers as evening fell;
And slowly walked by the darkening road toward it;
And saw how the towers darkened against the sky;
And across the distance heard the toll of a bell.

Along the darkening road he hurried alone,
With his eyes cast down,
And thought how the streets were hoarse with a tide of people,
With clamor of voices, and numberless faces . . .
And it seemed to him, of a sudden, that he would drown
Here in the quiet of evening air,
These empty and voiceless places . . .
And he hurried towards the city, to enter there.

Along the darkening road, between tall trees
That made a sinister whisper, loudly he walked.
Behind him, sea-gulls dipped over long grey seas.
Before him, numberless lovers smiled and talked.
And death was observed with sudden cries,
And birth with laughter and pain.

And the trees grew taller and blacker against the skies
And night came down again.

IV

Up high black walls, up sombre terraces,
Clinging like luminous birds to the sides of cliffs,
The yellow lights went climbing towards the sky.
From high black walls, gleaming vaguely with rain,
Each yellow light looked down like a golden eye.

They trembled from coign to coign, and tower to tower,
Along high terraces quicker than dream they flew.
And some of them steadily glowed, and some soon vanished,
And some strange shadows threw.

And behind them all the ghosts of thoughts went moving,
Restlessly moving in each lamplit room,
From chair to mirror, from mirror to fire;
From some, the light was scarcely more than a gloom:
From some, a dazzling desire.

And there was one, beneath black eaves, who thought,
Combing with lifted arms her golden hair,
Of the lover who hurried towards her through the night;
And there was one who dreamed of a sudden death
As she blew out her light.

And there was one who turned from clamoring streets,
And walked in lamplit gardens among black trees,
And looked at the windy sky,
And thought with terror how stones and roots would freeze
And birds in the dead boughs cry . . .

And she hurried back, as snow fell, mixed with rain,
To mingle among the crowds again,
To jostle beneath blue lamps along the street;
And lost herself in the warm bright coiling dream,
With a sound of murmuring voices and shuffling feet.

And one, from his high bright window looking down
On luminous chasms that cleft the basalt town,
Hearing a sea-like murmur rise,
Desired to leave his dream, descend from the tower,
And drown in waves of shouts and laughter and cries.

V

The snow floats down upon us, mingled with rain . . .
It eddies around pale lilac lamps, and falls
Down golden-windowed walls.
We were all born of flesh, in a flare of pain,
We do not remember the red roots whence we rose,
But we know that we rose and walked, that after a while
We shall lie down again.

The snow floats down upon us, we turn, we turn,
Through gorges filled with light we sound and flow . . .
One is struck down and hurt, we crowd about him,
We bear him away, gaze after his listless body;
But whether he lives or dies we do not know.

One of us sings in the street, and we listen to him;
The words ring over us like vague bells of sorrow.
He sings of a house he lived in long ago.
It is strange; this house of dust was the house I lived in;
The house you lived in, the house that all of us know.
And coiling slowly about him, and laughing at him,
And throwing him pennies, we bear away
A mournful echo of other times and places,
And follow a dream . . . a dream that will not stay.

Down long broad flights of lamplit stairs we flow;
Noisy, in scattered waves, crowding and shouting;
In broken slow cascades.
The gardens extend before us . . . We spread out swiftly;
Trees are above us, and darkness. The canyon fades . . .

And we recall, with a gleaming stab of sadness,
Vaguely and incoherently, some dream

Of a world we came from, a world of sun-blue hills . . .
A black wood whispers around us, green eyes gleam;
Someone cries in the forest, and someone kills.

We flow to the east, to the white-lined shivering sea;
We reach to the west, where the whirling sun went down;
We close our eyes to music in bright cafés.
We diverge from clamorous streets to streets that are silent.
We loaf where the wind-spilled fountain plays.

And, growing tired, we turn aside at last,
Remember our secret selves, seek out our towers,
Lay weary hands on the banisters, and climb;
Climbing, each, to his little four-square dream
Of love or lust or beauty or death or crime.

VI

Over the darkened city, the city of towers,
The city of a thousand gates,
Over the gleaming terraced roofs, the huddled towers,
Over a somnolent whisper of loves and hates,
The slow wind flows, drearily streams and falls,
With a mournful sound down rain-dark walls.
On one side purples the lustrous dusk of the sea,
And dreams in white at the city's feet;
On one side sleep the plains, with heaped-up hills.
Oaks and beeches whisper in rings about it.
Above the trees are towers where dread bells beat.
The fisherman draws his streaming net from the sea
And sails toward the far-off city, that seems
Like one vague tower.
The dark bow plunges to foam on blue-black waves,
And shrill rain seethes like a ghostly music about him
In a quiet shower.

Rain with a shrill seethe sings on the lapsing waves;
Rain thrills over the roofs again;
Like a shadow of shifting silver it crosses the city;
The lamps in the streets are streamed with rain;

And sparrows complain beneath deep eaves,
And among whirled leaves
The sea-gulls, blowing from tower to lower tower,
From wall to remoter wall,
Skim with the driven rain to the rising sea-sound
And close grey wings and fall. . . .

. . . Hearing great rain above me, I now remember
A girl who stood by the door and shut her eyes:
Her pale cheeks glistened with rain, she stood and shivered.
Into a forest of silver she vanished slowly . . .
Voices about me rise:
Voices clear and silvery, voices of raindrops,—
'We struck with silver claws, we struck her down.
We are the ghosts of the singing furies . . .'
A chorus of elfin voices blowing about me
Weaves to a babel of sound. Each cries a secret.
I run among them, reach out vain hands, and drown.

'I am the one who stood beside you and smiled,
Thinking your face so strangely young . . .'
'I am the one who loved you but did not dare.'
'I am the one you followed through crowded streets,
The one who escaped you, the one with red-gleamed hair.'

'I am the one you saw to-day, who fell
Senseless before you, hearing a certain bell:
A bell that broke great memories in my brain.'
'I am the one who passed unnoticed before you,
Invisible, in a cloud of secret pain.'

'I am the one who suddenly cried, beholding
The face of a certain man on the dazzling screen.
They wrote me that he was dead. It was long ago.
I walked in the streets for a long while, hearing nothing,
And returned to see it again. And it was so.'

Weave, weave, weave, you streaks of rain!
I am dissolved and woven again. . . .
Thousands of faces rise and vanish before me.
Thousands of voices weave in the rain.

'I am the one who rode beside you, blinking
At a dazzle of golden lights.
Tempests of music swept me: I was thinking
Of the gorgeous promise of certain nights:
Of the woman who suddenly smiled at me this day,
Smiled in a certain delicious sidelong way,
And turned, as she reached the door,
To smile once more . . .
Her hands are whiter than snow on midnight water.
Her throat is golden and full of golden laughter,
Her eyes are strange as the stealth of the moon
On a night in June. . . .
She runs among whistling leaves; I hurry after;
She dances in dreams over white-waved water;
Her body is white and fragrant and cool,
Magnolia petals that float on a white-starred pool. . . .
I have dreamed of her, dreaming for many nights
Of a broken music and golden lights,
Of broken webs of silver, heavily falling
Between my hands and their white desire:
And dark-leaved boughs, edged with a golden radiance,
Dipping to screen a fire. . . .
I dream that I walk with her beneath high trees,
But as I lean to kiss her face,
She is blown aloft on wind, I catch at leaves,
And run in a moonless place;
And I hear a crashing of terrible rocks flung down,
And shattering trees and cracking walls,
And a net of intense white flame roars over the town,
And someone cries; and darkness falls. . . .
But now she has leaned and smiled at me,
My veins are afire with music,
Her eyes have kissed me, my body is turned to light;
I shall dream to her secret heart tonight . . .'

He rises and moves away, he says no word,
He folds his evening paper and turns away;
I rush through the dark with rows of lamplit faces;
Fire bells peal, and some of us turn to listen,
And some sit motionless in their accustomed places.

Cold rain lashes the car-roof, scurries in gusts,
Streams down the windows in waves and ripples of lustre;
The lamps in the streets are distorted and strange.
Someone takes his watch from his pocket and yawns.
One peers out for the place at which to change.

Rain . . . rain . . . rain . . . we are buried in rain,
It will rain forever, the swift wheels hiss through water,
Pale sheets of water gleam in the windy street.
The pealing of bells is lost in a drive of rain-drops.
Remote and hurried the great bells beat.

'I am the one whom life so shrewdly betrayed,
Misfortune dogs me, it always hunted me down.
And to-day the woman I love lies dead.
I gave her roses, a ring with opals;
These hands have touched her head.

'I bound her to me in all soft ways,
I bound her to me in a net of days,
Yet now she has gone in silence and said no word.
How can we face these dazzling things, I ask you?
There is no use: we cry: and are not heard.

'They cover a body with roses . . . I shall not see it . . .
Must one return to the lifeless walls of a city
Whose soul is charred by fire? . . .'
His eyes are closed, his lips press tightly together.
Wheels hiss beneath us. He yields us our desire.

'No, do not stare so—he is weak with grief,
He cannot face you, he turns his eyes aside;
He is confused with pain.
I suffered this. I know. It was long ago . . .
He closes his eyes and drowns in death again.'

The wind hurls blows at the rain-starred glistening windows,
The wind shrills down from the half-seen walls.
We flow on the mournful wind in a dream of dying;
And at last a silence falls.

VII

Midnight; bells toll, and along the cloud-high towers
The golden lights go out. . . .
The yellow windows darken, the shades are drawn,
In thousands of rooms we sleep, we await the dawn,
We lie face down, we dream,
We cry aloud with terror, half rise, or seem
To stare at the ceiling or walls . . .
Midnight . . . the last of shattering bell-notes falls.
A rush of silence whirls over the cloud-high towers,
A vortex of soundless hours.

'The bells have just struck twelve: I should be sleeping.
But I cannot delay any longer to write and tell you.
The woman is dead.
She died—you know the way. Just as we planned.
Smiling, with open sunlit eyes.
Smiling upon the outstretched fatal hand. . . .'

He folds his letter, steps softly down the stairs.
The doors are closed and silent. A gas-jet flares.
His shadow disturbs a shadow of balustrades.
The door swings shut behind. Night roars above him.
Into the night he fades.

Wind; wind; wind; carving the walls;
Blowing the water that gleams in the street;
Blowing the rain, the sleet.
In the dark alley, an old tree cracks and falls,
Oak-boughs moan in the haunted air;
Lamps blow down with a crash and tinkle of glass . . .
Darkness whistles . . . Wild hours pass . . .

And those whom sleep eludes lie wide-eyed, hearing
Above their heads a goblin night go by;
Children are waked, and cry,
The young girl hears the roar in her sleep, and dreams
That her lover is caught in a burning tower,
She clutches the pillow, she gasps for breath, she screams . . .
And then by degrees her breath grows quiet and slow,
She dreams of an evening, long ago:

Of colored lanterns balancing under trees,
Some of them softly catching afire;
And beneath the lanterns a motionless face she sees,
Golden with lamplight, smiling, serene. . . .
The leaves are a pale and glittering green,
The sound of horns blows over the trampled grass,
Shadows of dancers pass. . . .
The face smiles closer to hers, she tries to lean
Backward, away, the eyes burn close and strange,
The face is beginning to change,—
It is her lover, she no longer desires to resist,
She is held and kissed.
She closes her eyes, and melts in a seethe of flame . . .
With a smoking ghost of shame. . . .

Wind, wind, wind. . . . Wind in an enormous brain
Blowing dark thoughts like fallen leaves. . . .
The wind shrieks, the wind grieves;
It dashes the leaves on walls, it whirls then again;
And the enormous sleeper vaguely and stupidly dreams
And desires to stir, to resist a ghost of pain.

One, whom the city imprisoned because of his cunning,
Who dreamed for years in a tower,
Seizes this hour
Of tumult and wind. He files through the rusted bar,
Leans his face to the rain, laughs up at the night,
Slides down the knotted sheet, swings over the wall,
To fall to the street with a cat-like fall,
Slinks round a quavering rim of windy light,
And at last is gone,
Leaving his empty cell for the pallor of dawn. . . .

The mother whose child was buried to-day
Turns her face to the window; her face is grey;
And all her body is cold with the coldness of rain.
He would have grown as easily as a tree,
He would have spread a pleasure of shade above her,
He would have been his father again . . .
His growth was ended by a freezing invisible shadow.
She lies, and does not move, and is stabbed by the rain.

Wind, wind, wind; we toss and dream;
We dream we are clouds and stars, blown in a stream:
Windows rattle above our beds;
We reach vague-gesturing hands, we lift our heads,
Hear sounds far off,—and dream, with quivering breath,
Our curious separate ways through life and death.

VIII

The white fog creeps from the cold sea over the city,
Over the pale grey tumbled towers,—
And settles among the roofs, the pale grey walls.
Along damp sinuous streets it crawls,
Curls like a dream among the motionless trees
And seems to freeze.

The fog slips ghostlike in to a thousand rooms,
Whirls over sleeping faces,
Spins in an atomy dance round misty street lamps;
And blows in cloudy waves over open spaces. . . .

And one from his high bright window, looking down,
Peers at the cloud-white town,
And thinks its island towers are like a dream . . .
It seems an enormous sleeper, within whose brain
Laborious shadows revolve and break and gleam.

PART II

I

THE round red sun heaves darkly out of the sea.
The walls and towers are warmed and gleam.
Sounds go drowsily up from streets and wharves.
The city stirs like one that is half in dream.

And the mist flows up by dazzling walls and windows,
Where one by one we wake and rise.
We gaze at the pale grey lustrous sea a moment,
We rub the darkness from our eyes,

And face our thousand devious secret mornings;
And do not see how the pale mist, slowly ascending,
Shaped by the sun, shines like a white-robed dreamer
Compassionate over our towers bending.

There, like one who gazes into a crystal,
He broods upon our city with sombre eyes;
He sees our secret fears vaguely unfolding,
Sees cloudy symbols shape to rise.

Each gleaming point of light is like a seed
Dilating swiftly to coiling fires.
Each cloud becomes a rapidly dimming face,
Each hurrying face records its strange desires.

We descend our separate stairs toward the day,
Merge in the somnolent mass that fills the street,
Lift our eyes to the soft blue space of sky,
And walk by the well-known walls with accustomed feet.

II

More towers must yet be built—more towers destroyed—
Great rocks hoisted in air;
And he must seek his bread in high pale sunlight
With gulls about him, and clouds just over his eyes . . .
And so he did not mention his dream of falling
But drank his coffee in silence, and heard in his ears
That horrible whistle of wind, and felt his breath
Sucked out of him, and saw the tower flash by
And the small tree swell beneath him. . . .
He patted his boy on the head, and kissed his wife,
Looked quickly around the room, to remember it,—
And so went out . . . For once, he forgot his pail.

Something had changed—but it was not the street—
The street was just the same—it was himself.
Puddles flashed in the sun. In the pawn-shop door
The same old black cat winked green amber eyes;
The butcher stood by his window tying his apron;
The same men walked beside him, smoking pipes,
Reading the morning paper. . . .

He would not yield, he thought, and walk more slowly,
As if he knew for certain he walked to death:
But with his usual pace,—deliberate, firm,
Looking about him calmly, watching the world,
Taking his ease. . . . Yet, when he thought again
Of the same dream, now dreamed three separate times,
Always the same, and heard that whistling wind,
And saw the windows flashing upward past him,—
He slowed his pace a little, and thought with horror
How monstrously that small tree thrust to meet him! . . .
He slowed his pace a little and remembered his wife.

Was forty, then, too old for work like this?
Why should it be? He'd never been afraid—
His eye was sure, his hand was steady . . .
But dreams had meanings.
He walked more slowly, and looked along the roofs,
All built by men, and saw the pale blue sky;
And suddenly he was dizzy with looking at it,
It seemed to whirl and swim,
It seemed the color of terror, of speed, of death. . . .
He lowered his eyes to the stones, he walked more slowly;
His thoughts wre blown and scattered like leaves;
He thought of the pail . . . Why, then, was it forgotten?
Because he would not need it?

Then, just as he was grouping his thoughts again
About that drug-store corner, under an arc-lamp,
Where first he met the girl whom he would marry,—
That blue-eyed innocent girl, in a soft blouse,—
He waved his hand for signal, and up he went
In the dusty chute that hugged the wall;
Above the tree; from girdered floor to floor;
Above the flattening roofs, until the sea
Lay wide and waved before him . . . And then he stepped
Giddily out, from that security,
To the red rib of iron against the sky,
And walked along it, feeling it sing and tremble;
And looking down one instant, saw the tree
Just as he dreamed it was; and looked away,
And up again, feeling his blood go wild.

He gave the signal; the long girder swung
Closer upon him, dropped clanging into place,
Almost pushing him off. Pneumatic hammers
Began their madhouse clatter, the white-hot rivets
Were tossed from below and deftly caught in pails;
He signalled again, and wiped his mouth, and thought
A place so high in the air should be more quiet.
The tree, far down below, teased at his eyes,
Teased at the corners of them, until he looked,
And felt his body go suddenly small and light;
Felt his brain float off like a dwindling vapor;
And heard a whistle of wind, and saw a tree
Come plunging up to him, and thought to himself,
'By God—I'm done for now, the dream was right . . .'

III

The warm sun dreams in the dust, the warm sun falls
On bright red roofs and walls;
The trees in the park exhale a ghost of rain;
We go from door to door in the streets again,
Talking, laughing, dreaming, turning our faces,
Recalling other times and places. . . .
We crowd, not knowing why, around a gate,
We crowd together and wait,
A stretcher is carried out, voices are stilled,
The ambulance drives away.
We watch its roof flash by, hear someone say
'A man fell off the building and was killed—
Fell right into a barrel. . . .' We turn again
Among the frightened eyes of white-faced men,
And go our separate ways, each bearing with him
A thing he tries, but vainly, to forget,—
A sickened crowd, a stretcher red and wet.

A hurdy-gurdy sings in the crowded street,
The golden notes skip over the sunlit stones,
Wings are upon our feet.
The sun seems warmer, the winding street more bright,
Sparrows come whirring down in a cloud of light.

We bear our dreams among us, bear them all,
Like hurdy-gurdy music they rise and fall,
Climb to beauty and die.
The wandering lover dreams of his lover's mouth,
And smiles at the hostile sky.
The broker smokes his pipe, and sees a fortune.
The murderer hears a cry.

IV

'Draw three cards, and I will tell your future . . .
Draw three cards, and lay them down,
Rest your palms upon them, stare at the crystal,
And think of time . . . My father was a clown,
My mother was a gypsy out of Egypt;
And she was gotten with child in a strange way;
And I was born in a cold eclipse of the moon,
With the future in my eyes as clear as day.'

I sit before the gold-embroidered curtain
And think her face is like a wrinkled desert.
The crystal burns in lamplight beneath my eyes.
A dragon slowly coils on the scaly curtain.
Upon a scarlet cloth a white skull lies.

'Your hand is on the hand that holds three lilies.
You will live long, love many times.
I see a dark girl here who once betrayed you.
I see a shadow of secret crimes.

'There was a man who came intent to kill you,
And hid behind a door and waited for you;
There was a woman who smiled at you and lied.
There was a golden girl who loved you, begged you,
Crawled after you, and died.

'There is a ghost of murder in your blood—
Coming or past, I know not which.
And here is danger—a woman with sea-green eyes,
And white-skinned as a witch. . . .'

The words hiss into me, like raindrops falling
On sleepy fire . . . She smiles a meaning smile.
Suspicion eats my brain; I ask a question;
Something is creeping at me, something vile;

And suddenly on the wall behind her head
I see a monstrous shadow strike and spread,
The lamp puffs out, a great blow crashes down.
I plunge through the curtain, run through dark to the street,
And hear swift steps retreat. . . .

The shades are drawn, the door is locked behind me.
Behind the door I hear a hammer sounding.
I walk in a cloud of wonder; I am glad.
I mingle among the crowds; my heart is pounding;
You do not guess the adventure I have had! . . .

Yet you, too, all have had your dark adventures,
Your sudden adventures, or strange, or sweet . . .
My peril goes out from me, is blown among you.
We loiter, dreaming together, along the street.

V

Round white clouds roll slowly above the housetops,
Over the clear red roofs they flow and pass.
A flock of pigeons rises with blue wings flashing,
Rises with whistle of wings, hovers an instant,
And settles slowly again on the tarnished grass.

And one old man looks down from a dusty window
And sees the pigeons circling about the fountain
And desires once more to walk among those trees.
Lovers walk in the noontime by that fountain.
Pigeons dip their beaks to drink from the water.
And soon the pond must freeze.

The light wind blows to his ears a sound of laughter,
Young men shuffle their feet, loaf in the sunlight;
A girl's laugh rings like a silver bell.
But clearer than all these sounds is a sound he hears

More in his secret heart than in his ears,—
A hammer's steady crescendo, like a knell.
He hears the snarl of pineboards under the plane,
The rhythmic saw, and then the hammer again,—
Playing with delicate strokes that sombre scale . . .
And the fountain dwindles, the sunlight seems to pale.

Time is a dream, he thinks, a destroying dream;
It lays great cities in dust, it fills the seas;
It covers the face of beauty, and tumbles walls.
Where was the woman he loved? Where was his youth?
Where was the dream that burned his brain like fire?
Even a dream grows grey at last and falls.

He opened his book once more, beside the window,
And read the printed words upon that page.
The sunlight touched his hand; his eyes moved slowly;
The quiet words enchanted time and age.

'Death is never an ending, death is a change;
Death is beautiful, for death is strange;
Death is one dream out of another flowing;
Death is a chorded music, softly going
By sweet transition from key to richer key.
Death is a meeting place of sea and sea.'

VI

She turned her head on the pillow, and cried once more.
And drawing a shaken breath, and closing her eyes,
To shut out, if she could, this dingy room,
The wigs and costumes scattered around the floor,—
Yellows and greens in the dark,—she walked again
Those nightmare streets which she had walked so often . . .
Here, at a certain corner, under an arc-lamp,
Blown by a bitter wind, she stopped and looked
In through the brilliant windows of a drug-store,
And wondered if she dared to ask for poison:
But it was late, few customers were there,
The eyes of all the clerks would freeze upon her,
And she would wilt, and cry. . . . Here, by the river,

She listened to the water slapping the wall,
And felt queer fascination in its blackness:
But it was cold, the little waves looked cruel,
The stars were keen, and a windy dash of spray
Struck her cheek, and withered her veins. . . . And so
She dragged herself once more to home, and bed.

Paul hadn't guessed it yet—though twice, already,
She'd fainted—once, the first time, on the stage.
So she must tell him soon—or else—get out . . .
How could she say it? That was the hideous thing.
She's rather die than say it! . . . and all the trouble,
Months when she couldn't earn a cent, and then,
If he refused to marry her . . . well, what?
She saw him laughing, making a foolish joke,
His grey eyes turning quickly; and the words
Fled from her tongue. . . . She saw him sitting silent,
Brooding over his morning coffee, maybe,
And tried again . . . she bit her lips, and trembled,
And looked away, and said . . . 'Say Paul, boy,—listen—
There's something I must tell you . . .' There she stopped,
Wondering what he'd say. . . . What would he say?
'Spring it, kid! Don't look so serious!'
'But what I've got to say—*is*—serious!'
Then she could see how, suddenly, he would sober,
His eyes would darken, he'd look so terrifying—
He always did—and what could she do but cry?
Perhaps, then, he would guess—perhaps he wouldn't.
And if he didn't, but asked her 'What's the matter?'—
She knew she'd never tell—just say she was sick. . . .
And after that, when would she dare again?
And what would he do—even suppose she told him?

If it were Felix! If it were only Felix!—
She wouldn't mind so much. But as it was,
Bitterness choked her, she had half a mind
To pay out Felix for never having liked her,
By making people think that it was him . . .
She'd write a letter to someone, before she died,—
Just saying 'Felix did it—and wouldn't marry.'
And then she'd die. . . . But that was hard on Paul. . . .

Paul would never forgive her—he'd never forgive her!
Sometimes she almost thought Paul really loved her . . .
She saw him look reproachfully at her coffin.

And then she closed her eyes and walked again
Those nightmare streets that she had walked so often:
Under an arc-lamp swinging in the wind
She stood, and stared in through a drug-store window,
Watching a clerk wrap up a little pill-box.
But it was late. No customers were there,—
Pitiless eyes would freeze her secret in her!
And then—what poison would she dare to ask for?
And if they asked her why, what would she say?

VII

Two lovers, here at the corner, by the steeple,
Two lovers blow together like music blowing:
And the crowd dissolves about them like a sea.
Recurring waves of sound break vaguely about them,
They drift from wall to wall, from tree to tree.

'Well, am I late?' Upward they look and laugh,
They look at the great clock's golden hands,
They laugh and talk, not knowing what they say:
Only, their words like music seem to play;
And seeming to walk, they tread strange sarabands.

'I brought you this . . .' the soft words float like stars
Down the smooth heaven of her memory.
She stands again by a garden wall,
The peach tree is in bloom, pink blossoms fall,
Water sings from an opened tap, the bees
Glisten and murmur among the trees.
Someone calls from the house. She does not answer.
Backward she leans her head,
And dreamily smiles at the peach-tree leaves, wherethrough
She sees an infinite May sky spread
A vault profoundly blue.
The voice from the house fades far away,
The glistening leaves more vaguely ripple and sway . . .

The tap is closed, the water ceases to hiss . . .
Silence . . . blue sky . . . and then, 'I brought you this . . .'
She turns again, and smiles . . . He does not know
She smiles from long ago . . .

She turns to him and smiles . . . Sunlight above him
Roars like a vast invisible sea,
Gold is beaten before him, shrill bells of silver;
He is released of weight, his body is free,
He lifts his arms to swim,
Dark years like sinister tides coil under him . . .
The lazy sea-waves crumble along the beach
With a whirring sound like wind in bells,
He lies outstretched on the yellow wind-worn sands
Reaching his lazy hands
Among the golden grains and sea-white shells . . .

'One white rose . . . or is it pink, to-day?'
They pause and smile, not caring what they say,
If only they may talk.
The crowd flows past them like dividing waters.
Dreaming they stand, dreaming they walk.
'Pink,—to-day!'—Face turns to dream-bright face,
Green leaves rise round them, sunshine settles upon them,
Water, in drops of silver, falls from the rose.
She smiles at a face that smiles through leaves from the mirror.
She breathes the fragrance; her dark eyes close . . .

Time is dissolved, it blows like a little dust:
Time, like a flurry of rain,
Patters and passes, starring the window-pane.
Once, long ago, one night,
She saw the lightning, with long blue quiver of light,
Ripping the darkness . . . and as she turned in terror
A soft face leaned above her, leaned softly down,
Softly around her a breath of roses was blown,
She sank in waves of quiet, she seemed to float
In a sea of silence . . . and soft steps grew remote . . .

'Well, let us walk in the park . . . The sun is warm,
We'll sit on a bench and talk . . . ' They turn and glide,

The crowd of faces wavers and breaks and flows.
'Look how the oak-tops turn to gold in the sunlight!
Look how the tower is changed and glows!'

Two lovers move in the crowd like a link of music,
We press upon them, we hold them, and let them pass;
A chord of music strikes us and straight we tremble;
We tremble like wind-blown grass.

What was this dream we had, a dream of music,
Music that rose from the opening earth like magic
And shook its beauty upon us and died away?
The long cold streets extend once more before us.
The red sun drops, the walls grow grey.

VIII

Well,—it was two days after my husband died—
Two days! And the earth still raw above him.
And I was sweeping the carpet in their hall.
In number four—the room with the red wall-paper—
Some chorus girls and men were singing that song
'They'll soon be lighting candles
Round a box with silver handles'—and hearing them sing it
I started to cry. Just then he came along
And stopped on the stairs and turned and looked at me,
And took the cigar from his mouth and sort of smiled
And said, 'Say, what's the matter?' and then came down
Where I was leaning against the wall,
And touched my shoulder, and put his arm around me . . .
And I was so sad, thinking about it,—
Thinking that it was raining, and a cold night,
With Jim so unaccustomed to being dead,—
That I was happy to have him sympathize,
To feel his arm, and leaned against him and cried.
And before I knew it, he got me into a room
Where a table was set, and no one there,
And sat me down on a sofa, and held me close,
And talked to me, telling me not to cry,
That it was all right, he'd look after me,—
But not to cry, my eyes were getting red,
Which didn't make me pretty. And he was so nice,

That when he turned my face between his hands,
And looked at me, with those blue eyes of his,
And smiled, and leaned, and kissed me—
Somehow I couldn't tell him not to do it,
Somehow I didn't mind, I let him kiss me,
And closed my eyes! . . . Well, that was how it started.
For when my heart was eased with crying, and grief
Had passed and left me quiet, somehow it seemed
As if it wasn't honest to change my mind,
To send him away, or say I hadn't meant it—
And, anyway, it seemed so hard to explain!
And so we sat and talked, not talking much,
But meaning as much in silence as in words,
There in that empty room with palms about us,
That private dining-room . . . And as we sat there
I felt my future changing, day by day,
With unknown streets opening left and right,
New streets with farther lights, new taller houses,
Doors swinging into hallways filled with light,
Half-opened luminous windows, with white curtains
Streaming out in the night, and sudden music,—
And thinking of this, and through it half remembering
A quick and horrible death, my husband's eyes,
The broken-plastered walls, my boy asleep,—
It seemed as if my brain would break in two.
My voice began to tremble . . . and when I stood,
And told him I must go, and said good-night—
I couldn't see the end. How would it end?
Would he return tomorrow? Or would he not?
And did I want him to—or would I rather
Look for another job?—He took my shoulders
Between his hands, and looked down into my eyes,
And smiled, and said good-night. If he had kissed me,
That would have—well, I don't know; but he didn't . . .
And so I went downstairs, then, half elated,
Hoping to close the door before that party
In number four should sing that song again—
'They'll soon be lighting candles round a box with silver
handles'—
And sure enough, I did. I faced the darkness.
And my eyes were filled with tears. And I was happy.

IX

The days, the nights, flow one by one above us,
The hours go silently over our lifted faces,
We are like dreamers who walk beneath a sea.
Beneath high walls we flow in the sun together.
We sleep, we wake, we laugh, we pursue, we flee.

We sit at tables and sip our morning coffee,
We read the papers for tales of lust or crime.
The door swings shut behind the latest comer.
We set our watches, regard the time.

What have we done? I close my eyes, remember
The great machine whose sinister brain before me
Smote and smote with a rhythmic beat.
My hands have torn down walls, the stone and plaster.
I dropped great beams to the dusty street.

My eyes are worn with measuring cloths of purple,
And golden cloths, and wavering cloths, and pale.
I dream of a crowd of faces, white with menace.
Hands reach up to tear me. My brain will fail.

Here, where the walls go down beneath our picks,
These walls whose windows gape against the sky,
Atom by atom of flesh and brain and marble
Will build a glittering tower before we die . . .

The young boy whistles, hurrying down the street,
The young girl hums beneath her breath.
One goes out to beauty, and does not know it.
And one goes out to death.

X

'Number four—the girl who died on the table—
The girl with golden hair—'
The purpling body lies on the polished marble.
We open the throat, and lay the thyroid bare . . .

One, who held the ether-cone, remembers
Her dark blue frightened eyes.
He heard the sharp breath quiver, and saw her breast
More hurriedly fall and rise.
Her hands made futile gestures, she turned her head
Fighting for breath; her cheeks were flushed to scarlet,—
And, suddenly, she lay dead.

And all the dreams that hurried along her veins
Came to the darkness of a sudden wall.
Confusion ran among them, they whirled and clamored,
They fell, they rose, they struck, they shouted,
Till at last a pallor of silence hushed them all.

What was her name? Where had she walked that morning?
Through what dark forest came her feet?
Along what sunlit walls, what peopled street?

Backward he dreamed along a chain of days,
He saw her go her strange and secret ways,
Waking and sleeping, noon and night.
She sat by a mirror, braiding her golden hair.
She read a story by candlelight.

Her shadow ran before her along the street,
She walked with rhythmic feet,
Turned a corner, descended a stair.
She bought a paper, held it to scan the headlines,
Smiled for a moment at sea-gulls high in sunlight,
And drew deep breaths of air.

Days passed, bright clouds of days. Nights passed. And music
Murmured within the walls of lighted windows.
She lifted her face to the light and danced.
The dancers wreathed and grouped in moving patterns,
Clustered, receded, streamed, advanced.

Her dress was purple, her slippers were golden,
Her eyes were blue; and a purple orchid
Opened its golden heart on her breast . . .
She leaned to the surly languor of lazy music,
Leaned on her partner's arm to rest.

The violins were weaving a weft of silver,
The horns were weaving a lustrous brede of gold,
And time was caught in a glistening pattern,
Time, too elusive to hold . . .

Shadows of leaves fell over her face,—and sunlight:
She turned her face away.
Nearer she moved to a crouching darkness
With every step and day.

Death, who at first had thought of her only an instant,
At a great distance, across the night,
Smiled from a window upon her, and followed her slowly
From purple light to light.

Once, in her dreams, he spoke out clearly, crying,
'I am the murderer, death.
I am the lover who keeps his appointment
At the doors of breath!'

She rose and stared at her own reflection,
Half dreading there to find
The dark-eyed ghost, waiting beside her,
Or reaching from behind
To lay pale hands upon her shoulders . . .
Or was this in her mind? . . .

She combed her hair. The sunlight glimmered
Along the tossing strands.
Was there a stillness in this hair,—
A quiet in these hands?

Death was a dream. It could not change these eyes,
Blow out their light, or turn this mouth to dust.
She combed her hair and sang. She would live forever.
Leaves flew past her window along a gust . . .
And graves were dug in the earth, and coffins passed,
And music ebbed with the ebbing hours.
And dreams went along her veins, and scattering clouds
Threw streaming shadows on walls and towers.

XI

Snow falls. The sky is grey, and sullenly glares
With purple lights in the canyoned street.
The fiery sign on the dark tower wreathes and flares . . .
The trodden grass in the park is covered with white,
The streets grow silent beneath our feet . . .
The city dreams, it forgets its past to-night.

And one, from his high bright window looking down
Over the enchanted whiteness of the town,
Seeing through whirls of white the vague grey towers,
Desires like this to forget what will not pass,
The littered papers, the dust, the tarnished grass,
Grey death, stale ugliness, and sodden hours.
Deep in his heart old bells are beaten again,
Slurred bells of grief and pain,
Dull echoes of hideous times and poisonous places.
He desires to drown in a cold white peace of snow.
He desires to forget a million faces . . .

In one room breathes a woman who dies of hunger.
The clock ticks slowly and stops. And no one winds it.
In one room fade grey violets in a vase.
Snowflakes faintly hiss and melt on the window.
In one room, minute by minute, the flutist plays
The lamplit page of music, the tireless scales.
His hands are trembling, his short breath fails.

In one room, silently, lover looks upon lover,
And thinks the air is fire.
The drunkard swears and touches the harlot's heart-strings
With the sudden hand of desire.

And one goes late in the streets, and thinks of murder;
And one lies staring, and thinks of death.
And one, who has suffered, clenches her hands despairing,
And holds her breath . . .

Who are all these, who flow in the veins of the city,
Coil and revolve and dream,

Vanish or gleam?

Some mount up to the brain and flower in fire.

Some are destroyed; some die; some slowly stream.

And the new are born who desire to destroy the old;

And fires are kindled and quenched; and dreams are broken,

And walls flung down . . .

And the slow night whirls in snow over towers of dreamers,

And whiteness hushes the town.

PART III

I

As evening falls,

And the yellow lights leap one by one

Along high walls;

And along black streets that glisten as if with rain;

The muted city seems

Like one in a restless sleep, who lies and dreams

Of vague desires, and memories, and half-forgotten pain . . .

Along dark veins, like lights the quick dreams run,

Flash, are extinguished, flash again,

To mingle and glow at last in the enormous brain

And die away . . .

As evening falls,

A dream dissolves these insubstantial walls,—

A myriad secretly gliding lights lie bare . . .

The lovers rise, the harlot combs her hair,

The dead man's face grows blue in the dizzy lamplight,

The watchman climbs the stair . . .

The bank defaulter leers at a chaos of figures,

And runs among them, and is beaten down;

The sick man coughs and hears the chisels ringing;

The tired clown

Sees the enormous crowd, a million faces,

Motionless in their places,

Ready to laugh, and seize, and crush and tear . . .

The dancer smooths her hair,

Laces her golden slippers, and runs through the door

To dance once more,

Hearing swift music like an enchantment rise,
Feeling the praise of a thousand eyes.

As darkness falls

The walls grow luminous and warm, the walls
Tremble and glow with the lives within them moving,
Moving like music, secret and rich and warm.
How shall we live tonight? Where shall we turn?
To what new light or darkness yearn?
A thousand winding stairs lead down before us;
And one by one in myriads we descend
By lamplit flowered walls, long balustrades,
Through half-lit halls which reach no end.

II

You read—what is it, then that you are reading?
What music moves so silently in your mind?
Your bright hand turns the page.
I watch you from my window, unsuspected:
You move in an alien land, a silent age . . .

. . . The poet—what was his name—? Tokkei—Tokkei—
The poet walked alone in a cold late rain,
And thought his grief was like the crying of sea-birds;
For his lover was dead, he never would love again.

Rain in the dreams of the mind—rain forever—
Rain in the sky of the heart—rain in the willows—
But then he saw this face, this face like flame,
This quiet lady, this portrait by Hiroshigi;
And took it home with him; and with it came

What unexpected changes, subtle as weather!
The dark room, cold as rain,
Grew faintly fragrant, stirred with a stir of April,
Warmed its corners with light again,

And smoke of incense whirled about this portrait,
And the quiet lady there,
So young, so quietly smiling, with calm hands,
Seemed ready to loose her hair,

And smile, and lean from the picture, or say one word,
The word already clear,
Which seemed to rise like light between her eyelids . . .
He held his breath to hear,

And smiled for shame, and drank a cup of wine,
And held a candle, and searched her face
Through all the little shadows, to see what secret
Might give so warm a grace . . .

Was it the quiet mouth, restrained a little?
The eyes, half turned aside?
The jade ring on her wrist, still almost swinging? . . .
The secret was denied,

He chose his favorite pen and drew three verses,
And slept; and as he slept
A dream came into his heart, his lover entered,
And chided him, and wept.

And in the morning, waking, he remembered,
And thought the dream was strange.
Why did his darkened lover rise from the garden?
He turned, and felt a change,

As if a someone hidden smiled and watched him . . .
Yet there was only sunlight there.
Until he saw those young eyes, quietly smiling,
And held his breath to stare,

And could have sworn her cheek had turned—a little . . .
Had slightly turned away . . .
Sunlight dozed on the floor . . . He sat and wondered,
Nor left his room that day.

And that day, and for many days thereafter,
He sat alone, and thought
No lady had ever lived so beautiful
As Hiroshigi wrought . . .

Or if she lived, no matter in what country,
By what far river or hill or lonely sea,
He would look in every face until he found her . . .
There was no other as fair as she.

And before her quiet face he burned soft incense,
And brought her every day
Boughs of the peach, or almond, or snow-white cherry,
And somehow, she seemed to say,

This silent lady, young, and quietly smiling,
That she was happy there;
And sometimes, seeing this, he started to tremble,
And desired to touch her hair,

To lay his palm along her hand, touch faintly
With delicate finger-tips
The ghostly smile that seemed to hover and vanish
Upon her lips . . .

Until he knew he loved this quiet lady;
And night by night a dread
Leered at his dreams, for he knew that Hiroshigi
Was many centuries dead,—

And the lady, too, was dead, and all who knew her . . .
Dead, and long turned to dust . . .
The thin moon waxed and waned, and left him paler,
The peach leaves flew in a gust,

And he would surely have died; but there one day
A wise man, white with age,
Stared at the portrait, and said, 'This Hiroshigi
Knew more than archimage,—

'Cunningly drew the body, and called the spirit,
Till partly it entered there . . .
Sometimes, at death, it entered the portrait wholly . . .
Do all I say with care,

'And she you love may come to you when you call her . . .'
So then this ghost, Tokkei,
Ran in the sun, bought wine of a hundred merchants,
And alone at the end of day

Entered the darkening room, and faced the portrait,
And saw the quiet eyes
Gleaming and young in the dusk, and held the wine cup,
And knelt, and did not rise,

And said, aloud, 'Lo-san, will you drink this wine?'
Said it three times aloud.
And at the third the faint blue smoke of incense
Rose to the walls in a cloud,

And the lips moved faintly, and the eyes, and the calm hands
stirred;
And suddenly, with a sigh,
The quiet lady came slowly down from the portrait,
And stood, while worlds went by,

And lifted her young white hands and took the wine cup;
And the poet trembled, and said,
'Lo-san, will you stay forever?'—'Yes, I will stay.'—
'But what when I am dead?'

'When you are dead your spirit will find my spirit,
And then we shall die no more.'
Music came down upon them, and spring returning,
They remembered worlds before,

And years went over the earth, and over the sea,
And lovers were born and spoke and died,
But forever in sunlight went these two immortal,
Tokkei and the quiet bride . . .

III

The lamplit page is turned, the dream forgotten;
The music changes tone, you wake, remember
Deep worlds you lived before,—deep worlds hereafter
Of leaf on falling leaf, music on music,
Rain and sorrow and wind and dust and laughter.

Helen was late and Miriam came too soon.
Joseph was dead, his wife and children starving.
Elaine was married and soon to have a child.
You dreamed last night of fiddler-crabs with fiddles;
They played a buzzing melody, and you smiled.

To-morrow—what? And what of yesterday?
Through soundless labyrinths of dream you pass,
Through many doors to the one door of all.
Soon as it's opened we shall hear a music:
Or see a skeleton fall . . .

We walk with you. Where is it that you lead us?
We climb the muffled stairs beneath high lanterns.
We descend again. We grope through darkened cells.
You say: this darkness, here, will slowly kill me.
It creeps and weighs upon me . . . Is full of bells.

This is the thing remembered I would forget—
No matter where I go, how soft I tread,
This windy gesture menaces me with death.
Fatigue! it says, and points its finger at me;
Touches my throat and stops my breath.

My fans—my jewels—the portrait of my husband—
The torn certificate for my daughter's grave—
These are but mortal seconds in immortal time.
They brush me, fade away: like drops of water.
They signify no crime.

Let us retrace our steps: I have deceived you:
Nothing is here I could not frankly tell you:

No hint of guilt, or faithlessness, or threat.
Dreams—they are madness. Staring eyes—illusion.
Let us return, hear music, and forget . . .

IV

Of what she said to me that night—no matter.
The strange thing came next day.
My brain was full of music—something she played me—;
I couldn't remember it all, but phrases of it
Wreathed and wreathed among faint memories,
Seeking for something, trying to tell me something,
Urging to restlessness: verging on grief.
I tried to play the tune, from memory,—
But memory failed: the chords and discords climbed
And found no resolution—only hung there,
And left me morbid . . . Where, then, had I heard it? . . .
What secret dusty chamber was it hinting?
'Dust,' it said, 'dust . . . and dust . . . and sunlight . . .
A cold clear April evening . . . snow, bedraggled,
Rain-worn snow, dappling the hideous grass . . .
And someone walking alone; and someone saying
That all must end, for the time had come to go . . .'
These were the phrases . . . but behind, beneath them
A greater shadow moved: and in this shadow
I stood and guessed . . . Was it the blue-eyed lady?
The one who always danced in golden slippers—
And had I danced with her,—upon this music?
Or was it further back—the unplumbed twilight
Of childhood?—No—much recenter than that.

You know, without my telling you, how sometimes
A word or name eludes you, and you seek it
Through running ghosts of shadow,—leaping at it,
Lying in wait for it to spring upon it,
Spreading faint snares for it of sense or sound:
Until, of a sudden, as if in a phantom forest,
You hear it, see it flash among the branches,
And scarcely knowing how, suddenly have it—
Well, it was so I followed down this music,
Glimpsing a face in darkness, hearing a cry,

Remembering days forgotten, moods exhausted,
Corners in sunlight, puddles reflecting stars—;
Until, of a sudden, and least of all suspected,
The thing resolved itself: and I remembered
An April afternoon, eight years ago—
Or was it nine?—no matter—call it nine—
A room in which the last of sunlight faded;
A vase of violets, fragrance in white curtains;
And, she who played the same thing later, playing.

She played this tune. And in the middle of it
Abruptly broke it off, letting her hands
Fall in her lap. She sat there so a moment,
With shoulders drooped, then lifted up a rose,
One great white rose, wide opened like a lotos,
And pressed it to her cheek, and closed her eyes.
'You know—we've got to end this—Miriam loves you . . .
If she should ever know, or even guess it,—
What would she do?—Listen!—I'm not absurd . . .
I'm sure of it. If you had eyes, for women—
To understand them—which you've never had—
You'd know it too . . .' So went this colloquy,
Half humorous, with undertones of pathos,
Half grave, half flippant . . . while her fingers, softly,
Felt for this tune, played it and let it fall,
Now note by singing note, now chord by chord,
Repeating phrases with a kind of pleasure . . .
Was it symbolic of the woman's weakness
That she could neither break it—nor conclude?
It paused . . . and wandered . . . paused again; while she,
Perplexed and tired, half told me I must go,—
Half asked me if I thought I ought to go . . .

Well, April passed with many other evenings,
Evenings like this, with later suns and warmer,
With violets always there, and fragrant curtains . . .
And she was right: and Miriam found it out . . .
And after that, when eight deep years had passed—
Or nine—we met once more,—by accident . . .
But was it just by accident, I wonder,
She played this tune?—Or what, then, was intended? . . .

V

The cigarette-smoke loops and slides above us,
Dipping and swirling as the waiter passes;
You strike a match and stare upon the flame.
The tiny fire leaps in your eyes a moment,
And dwindles away as silently as it came.

This melody, you say, has certain voices—
They rise like nereids from a river, singing,
Lift white faces, and dive to darkness again.
Wherever you go you bear this river with you:
A leaf falls,—and it flows, and you have pain.

So says the tune to you—but what to me?
What to the waiter, as he pours your coffee,
The violinist who suavely draws his bow?
That man, who folds his paper, overhears it.
A thousand dreams revolve and fall and flow.

Some one there is who sees a virgin stepping
Down marble stairs to a deep tomb of roses:
At the last moment she lifts remembering eyes.
Green leaves blow down. The place is checked with shadows.
A long-drawn murmur of rain goes down the skies.

And oaks are stripped and bare, and smoke with lightning:
And clouds are blown and torn upon high forests,
And the great sea shakes its walls.
And then falls silence . . . And through long silence falls
This melody once more:
'Down endless stairs she goes, as once before.'

So says the tune to him—but what to me?
What are the worlds I see?
What shapes fantastic, terrible dreams? . . .
I go my secret way, down secret alleys;
My errand is not so simple as it seems.

VI

This is the house. On one side there is darkness,
On one side there is light.
Into the darkness you may lift your lanterns—
Oh any number—it will still be night.
And here are echoing stairs to lead you downward
To long sonorous halls.
And here is spring forever at these windows,
With roses on the walls.

This is her room. On one side there is music—
On one side not a sound.
At one step she could move from love to silence,
Feel myriad darkness coiling round.
And here are balconies from which she heard you,
Your steady footsteps on the stair.
And here the glass in which she saw your shadow
As she unbound her hair.

Here is the room—with ghostly walls dissolving—
The twilight room in which she called you 'lover';
And the floorless room in which she called you 'friend.'
So many times, in doubt, she ran between them!—
Through windy corridors of darkening end.

Here she could stand with one dim light above her
And hear far music, like a sea in caverns,
Murmur away at hollowed walls of stone.
And here, in a roofless room where it was raining,
She bore the patient sorrow of rain alone.

Your words were walls which suddenly froze around her.
Your words were windows,—large enough for moonlight,
Too small to let her through.
Your letters—fragrant cloisters faint with music.
The music that assuaged her there was you.

How many times she heard your step ascending
Yet never saw your face!

She heard them turn again, ring slowly fainter,
Till silence swept the place.
Why had you gone? . . . The door, perhaps, mistaken . . .
You would go elsewhere. The deep walls were shaken.

A certain rose-leaf—sent without intention—
Became, with time, a woven web of fire—
She wore it, and was warm.
A certain hurried glance, let fall at parting,
Became, with time, the flashings of a storm.

Yet, there was nothing asked, no hint to tell you
Of secret idols carved in secret chambers
From all you did and said.
Nothing was done, until at last she knew you.
Nothing was known, till, somehow, she was dead.

How did she die?—You say, she died of poison.
Simple and swift. And much to be regretted.
You did not see her pass
So many thousand times from light to darkness,
Pausing so many times before her glass;

You did not see how many times she hurried
To lean from certain windows, vainly hoping,
Passionate still for beauty, remembered spring.
You did not know how long she clung to music,
You did not hear her sing.

Did she, then, make the choice, and step out bravely
From sound to silence—close, herself, those windows?
Or was it true, instead,
That darkness moved,—for once,—and so possessed her? . . .
We'll never know, you say, for she is dead.

VII

You see that porcelain ranged there in the window—
Platters and soup-plates done with pale pink rosebuds,
And tiny violets, and wreaths of ivy?

See how the pattern clings to the gleaming edges!
They're works of art—minutely seen and felt,
Each petal done devoutly. Is it failure
To spend your blood like this?

Study them . . . you will see there, in the porcelain,
If you stare hard enough, a sort of swimming
Of lights and shadows, ghosts within a crystal—
My brain unfolding! There you'll see me sitting
Day after day, close to a certain window,
Looking down, sometimes, to see the people . . .
Sometimes my wife comes there to speak to me . . .
Sometimes the grey cat waves his tail around me . . .
Goldfish swim in a bowl, glisten in sunlight,
Dilate to a gorgeous size, blow delicate bubbles,
Drowse among dark green weeds. On rainy days,
You'll see a gas-light shedding light behind me—
An eye-shade round my forehead. There I sit,
Twirling the tiny brushes in my paint-cups,
Painting the pale pink rosebuds, minute violets,
Exquisite wreaths of dark green ivy leaves.
On this leaf, goes a dream I dreamed last night
Of two soft-patterned toads—I thought them stones,
Until they hopped! And then a great black spider,—
Tarantula, perhaps, a hideous thing,—
It crossed the room in one tremendous leap.
Here,—as I coil the stems between two leaves,—
It is as if, dwindling to atomy size,
I cried the secret between two universes . . .
A friend of mine took hasheesh once, and said
Just as he fell asleep he had a dream,—
Though with his eyes wide open,—
And felt, or saw, or knew himself a part
Of marvelous slowly-wreathing intricate patterns,
Plane upon plane, depth upon coiling depth,
Amazing leaves, folding one on another,
Voluted grasses, twists and curves and spirals—
All of it darkly moving . . . as for me,
I need no hasheesh for it—it's too easy!
Soon as I shut my eyes I set out walking
In a monstrous jungle of monstrous pale pink roseleaves,

Violets purple as death, dripping with water,
And ivy-leaves as big as clouds above me.

Here, in a simple pattern of separate violets—
With scalloped edges gilded—here you have me
Thinking of something else. My wife, you know,—
There's something lacking—force, or will, or passion,
I don't know what it is—and so, sometimes,
When I am tired, or haven't slept three nights,
Or it is cloudy, with low threat of rain,
I get uneasy—just like poplar trees
Ruffling their leaves—and I begin to think
Of poor Pauline, so many years ago,
And that delicious night. Where is she now?
I meant to write—but she has moved, by this time,
And then, besides, she might find out I'm married.
Well, there is more—I'm getting old and timid—
The years have gnawed my will. I've lost my nerve!
I never strike out boldly as I used to—
But sit here, painting violets, and remember
That thrilling night. Photographers, she said,
Asked her to pose for them; her eyes and forehead,—
Dark brown eyes, and a smooth and pallid forehead,—
Were thought so beautiful.—And so they were.
Pauline . . . These violets are like words remembered . . .
Darling! she whispered . . . Darling! . . . Darling! . . .
Darling!
Well, I suppose such days can come but once.
Lord, how happy we were! . . .

Here, if you only knew it, is a story—
Here, in these leaves. I stopped my work to tell it,
And then, when I had finished, went on thinking:
A man I saw on a train . . . I was still a boy . . .
Who killed himself by diving against a wall.
Here is a recollection of my wife,
When she was still my sweetheart, years ago.
It's funny how things change,—just change, by growing,
Without an effort . . . And here are trivial things,—
A chill, an errand forgotten, a cut while shaving;
A friend of mine who tells me he is married . . .
Or is that last so trivial? Well, no matter!

This is the sort of thing you'll see of me,
If you look hard enough. This, in its way,
Is a kind of fame. My life arranged before you
In scrolls of leaves, rosebuds, violets, ivy,
Clustered or wreathed on plate and cup and platter . . .
Sometimes, I say, I'm just like John the Baptist—
You have my head before you . . . on a platter.

VIII

Wind blows. Snow falls. The great clock in its tower
Ticks with reverberant coil and tolls the hour:
At the deep sudden stroke the pigeons fly . . .
The fine snow flutes the cracks between the flagstones.
We close our coats, and hurry, and search the sky.

We are like music, each voice of it pursuing
A golden separate dream, remote, persistent,
Climbing to fire, receding to hoarse despair.
What do you whisper, brother? What do you tell me? . . .
We pass each other, are lost, and do not care.

One mounts up to beauty, serenely singing,
Forgetful of the steps that cry behind him;
One drifts slowly down from a waking dream.
One, foreseeing, lingers forever unmoving . . .
Upward and downward, past him there, we stream.

One has death in his eyes: and walks more slowly.
Death, among jonquils, told him a freezing secret.
A cloud blows over his eyes, he ponders earth.
He sees in the world a forest of sunlit jonquils:
A slow black poison huddles beneath that mirth.

Death, from street to alley, from door to window,
Cries out his news,—of unplumbed worlds approaching,
Of a cloud of darkness soon to destroy the tower.
But why comes death,—he asks,—in a world so perfect?
Or why the minute's grey in the golden hour?

Music, a sudden glissando, sinister, troubled,
A drift of wind-torn petals, before him passes
Down jangled streets, and dies.
The bodies of old and young, of maimed and lovely,
Are slowly borne to earth, with a dirge of cries.

Down cobbled streets they come; down huddled stairways;
Through silent halls; through carved golden doorways;
From freezing rooms as bare as rock.
The curtains are closed across deserted windows.
Earth streams out of the shovel; the pebbles knock.

Mary, whose hands rejoiced to move in sunlight;
Silent Elaine; grave Anne, who sang so clearly;
Fugitive Helen, who loved and walked alone;
Miriam too soon dead, darkly remembered;
Childless Ruth, who sorrowed, but could not atone;

Jean, whose laughter flashed over depths of terror,
And Eloise, who desired to love but dared not;
Doris, who turned alone to the dark and cried,—
They are blown away like windflung chords of music,
They drift away; the sudden music has died.

And one, with death in his eyes, comes walking slowly
And sees the shadow of death in many faces,
And thinks the world is strange.
He desires immortal music and spring forever,
And beauty that knows no change.

IX

We sit together and talk, or smoke in silence.
You say (but use no words) 'this night is passing
As other nights when we are dead will pass . . .'
Perhaps I misconstrue you: you mean only,
'How deathly pale my face looks in that glass . . .'

You say: 'We sit and talk, of things important . . .
How many others like ourselves, this instant,

Mark the pendulum swinging against the wall?
How many others, laughing, sip their coffee—
Or stare at mirrors, and do not talk at all? . . .

'This is the moment' (so you would say, in silence)
When suddenly we have had too much of laughter:
And a freezing stillness falls, no word to say.
Our mouths feel foolish . . . For all the days hereafter
What have we saved—what news, what tune, what play?

'We see each other as vain and futile tricksters,—
Posturing like bald apes before a mirror;
No pity dims our eyes . . .
How many others, like ourselves, this instant,
See how the great world wizens, and are wise? . . .'

Well, you are right . . . No doubt, they fall, these seconds . . .
When suddenly all's distempered, vacuous, ugly,
And even those most like angels creep for schemes.
The one you love leans forward, smiles, deceives you,
Opens a door through which you see dark dreams.

But this is momentary . . . or else, enduring,
Leads you with devious eyes through mists and poisons
To horrible chaos, or suicide, or crime . . .
And all these others who at your conjuration
Grow pale, feeling the skeleton touch of time,—

Or, laughing sadly, talk of things important,
Or stare at mirrors, startled to see their faces,
Or drown in the waveless vacuum of their days,—
Suddenly, as from sleep, awake, forgetting
This nauseous dream; take up their accustomed ways,

Exhume the ghost of a joke, renew loud laughter,
Forget the moles above their sweethearts' eyebrows,
Lean to the music, rise,
And dance once more in a rose-festooned illusion
With kindness in their eyes . . .

They say (as we ourselves have said, remember)
 'What wizardry this slow waltz works upon us!
 And how it brings to mind forgotten things!'
 They say 'How strange it is that one such evening
 Can wake vague memories of so many springs!'

And so they go . . . In a thousand crowded places,
 They sit to smile and talk, or rise to ragtime,
 And, for their pleasures, agree or disagree.
 With secret symbols they play on secret passions.
 With cunning eyes they see

The innocent word that sets remembrance trembling,
 The dubious word that sets the scared heart beating . . .
 The pendulum on the wall
 Shakes down seconds . . . They laugh at time, dissembling;
 Or coil for a victim and do not talk at all.

X

From time to time, lifting his eyes, he sees
 The soft blue starlight through the one small window,
 The moon above black trees, and clouds, and Venus,—
 And turns to write . . . The clock behind ticks softly.

It is so long, indeed, since I have written,—
 Two years, almost, your last is turning yellow,—
 That these first words I write seem cold and strange.
 Are you the man I knew, or have you altered?
 Altered, of course—just as I too have altered—
 And whether towards each other, or more apart,
 We cannot say . . . I've just re-read your letter—
 Not through forgetfulness, but more for pleasure—
 Pondering much on all you say in it
 Of mystic consciousness—divine conversion—
 The sense of oneness with the infinite,—
 Faith in the world, its beauty, and its purpose . . .
 Well, you believe one must have faith, in some sort,
 If one's to walk through this dark world contented.
 But is the world so dark? Or is it rather

Our own brute minds,—in which we hurry, trembling,
Through streets as yet unlighted? This, I think.

You have been always, let me say, “romantic,”—
Eager for color, for beauty, soon discontented
With a world of dust and stones and flesh too ailing:
Even before the question grew to problem
And drove you bickering into metaphysics,
You met on lower planes the same great dragon,
Seeking release, some fleeting satisfaction,
In strange aesthetics . . . You tried, as I remember,
One after one, strange cults, and some, too, morbid,
The cruder first, more violent sensations,
Gorgeously carnal things, conceived and acted
With splendid animal thirst . . . Then, by degrees,—
Savoring all more delicate gradations
In all that hue and tone may play on flesh,
Or thought on brain,—you passed, if I may say so,
From red and scarlet through morbid greens to mauve.
Let us regard ourselves, you used to say,
As instruments of music, whereon our lives
Will play as we desire: and let us yield
These subtle bodies and subtler brains and nerves
To all experience plays . . . And so you went
From subtle tune to subtler, each heard once,
Twice or thrice at the most, tiring of each;
And closing one by one your doors, drew in
Slowly, through darkening labyrinths of feeling,
Towards the central chamber . . . Which now you’ve reached.

What, then’s, the secret of this ultimate chamber—
Or innermost, rather? If I see it clearly
It is the last, and cunningest, resort
Of one who has found this world of dust and flesh,—
This world of lamentations, death, injustice,
Sickness, humiliation, slow defeat,
Bareness, and ugliness, and iteration,—
Too meaningless; or, if it has a meaning,
Too tiresomely insistent on one meaning:
Futility . . . This world, I hear you saying,—
With lifted chin, and arm in outflung gesture,

Coldly imperious,—this transient world,
What has it then to give, if not containing
Deep hints of nobler worlds? We know its beauties,—
Momentary and trivial for the most part,
Perceived through flesh, passing like flesh away,—
And know how much outweighed they are by darkness.
We are like searchers in a house of darkness,
A house of dust; we creep with little lanterns,
Throwing our tremulous arcs of light at random,
Now here, now there, seeing a plane, an angle,
An edge, a curve, a wall, a broken stairway
Leading to who knows what; but never seeing
The whole at once . . . We grope our way a little,
And then grow tired. No matter what we touch,
Dust is the answer—dust: dust everywhere.
If this were all—what were the use, you ask?
But this is not: for why should we be seeking,
Why should we bring this need to seek for beauty,
To lift our minds, if there were only dust?
This is the central chamber you have come to:
Turning your back to the world, until you came
To this deep room, and looked through rose-stained windows,
And saw the hues of the world so sweetly changed.

Well, in a measure, so only do we all.
I am not sure that you can be refuted.
At the very last we all put faith in something,—
You in this ghost that animates your world,
This ethical ghost,—and I, you'll say, in reason,—
Or sensuous beauty,—or in my secret self . . .
Though as for that you put your faith in these,
As much as I do—and then, forsaking reason,—
Ascending, you would say, to intuition,—
You predicate this ghost of yours, as well.
Of course, you might have argued,—and you should have,—
That no such deep appearance of design
Could shape our world without entailing purpose:
For can design exist without a purpose?
Without conceiving mind? . . . We are like children
Who find, upon the sands, beside a sea,
Strange patterns drawn,—circles, arcs, ellipses,

Moulded in sand . . . Who put them there, we wonder?
Did someone draw them here before we came?
Or was it just the sea?—We pore upon them,
But find no answer—only suppositions.
And if these perfect shapes are evidence
Of immanent mind, it is but circumstantial:
We never come upon him at his work,
He never troubles us. He stands aloof—
Well, if he stands at all: is not concerned
With what we are or do. You, if you like,
May think he broods upon us, loves us, hates us,
Conceives some purpose of us. In so doing
You see, without much reason, will in law.
I am content to say, 'this world is ordered,
Happily so for us, by accident:
We go our ways untroubled save by laws
Of natural things.' Who makes the more assumption?

If we were wise—which God knows we are not—
(Notice I call on God!) we'd plumb this riddle
Not in the world we see, but in ourselves.
These brains of ours—these delicate spinal clusters—
Have limits: why not learn them, learn their cravings?
Which of the two minds, yours or mine, is sound?
Yours, which scorned the world that gave it freedom,
Until you managed to see that world as omen,—
Or mine, which likes the world, takes all for granted,
Sorrow as much as joy, and death as life?—
You lean on dreams, and take more credit for it.
I stand alone . . . Well, I take credit, too.
You find your pleasure in being at one with all things—
Fusing in lambent dream, rising and falling
As all things rise and fall . . . I do that too—
With reservations. I find more varied pleasure
In understanding: and so find beauty even
In this strange dream of yours you call the truth.

Well, I have bored you. And it's growing late.
For household news—what have you heard, I wonder?
You must have heard that Paul was dead, by this time—
Of spinal cancer. Nothing could be done—

We found it out too late. His death has changed me,
 Deflected much of me that lived as he lived,
 Saddened me, slowed me down. Such things will happen,
 Life is composed of them; and it seems wisdom
 To see them clearly, meditate upon them,
 And understand what things flow out of them.
 Otherwise, all goes on here much as always.
 Why won't you come and see us, in the spring,
 And bring old times with you?—If you could see me
 Sitting here by the window, watching Venus
 Go down behind my neighbor's poplar branches,—
 Just where you used to sit,—I'm sure you'd come.
 This year, they say, the springtime will be early.

XI

What shall we talk of? Li Po? Hokusai?
 You narrow your long dark eyes to fascinate me;
 You smile a little. . . . Outside, the night goes by.
 I walk alone in a forest of ghostly trees . . .
 Your pale hands rest palm downwards on your knees.

'These lines—converging—they suggest such distance!
 The soul is drawn away, beyond horizons.
 Lured out to what? One dares not think.
 Sometimes, I glimpse these infinite perspectives
 In intimate talk (with such as you) and shrink . . .

'One feels so petty!—One feels such—emptiness!—'
 You mimic horror, let fall your lifted hand,
 And smile at me; with brooding tenderness . . .
 Alone on darkened waters I fall and rise;
 Slow waves above me break, faint waves of cries.

'And then these colors . . . but who would dare describe them?
 This faint rose-coral pink . . . this green—pistachio?—
 So insubstantial! Like the dim ghostly things
 Two lovers find in love's still-twilight chambers . . .
 Old peacock-fans, and fragrant silks, and rings . . .

'Rings, let us say, drawn from the hapless fingers
Of some great lady, many centuries nameless,—
Or is that too sepulchral?—dulled with dust;
And necklaces that crumble if you touch them;
And gold brocades that, breathed on, fall to rust.

'No—I am wrong . . . it is not these I sought for—!
Why did they come to mind? You understand me—
You know these strange vagaries of the brain!—'
—I walk alone in a forest of ghostly trees;
Your pale hands rest palm downwards on your knees;
These strange vagaries of yours are all too plain.

'But why perplex ourselves with tedious problems
Of art or . . . such things? . . . while we sit here, living,
With all that's in our secret hearts to say!—'
Hearts?—Your pale hand softly strokes the satin.
You play deep music—know well what you play.
You stroke the satin with thrilling of finger-tips,
You smile, with faintly perfumed lips,
You loose your thoughts like birds,
Brushing our dreams with soft and shadowy words . . .
We know your words are foolish, yet here we stay,
I to be played on, you to play;
We know our words are foolish, yet sit here bound
In tremulous webs of sound.

'How beautiful is intimate talk like this!—
It is as if we dissolved grey walls between us,
Stepped through the solid portals, become but shadows,
To hear a hidden music . . . Our own vast shadows
Lean to a giant size on the windy walls,
Or dwindle away; we hear our soft footfalls
Echo forever behind us, ghostly clear,
Music sings far off, flows suddenly near,
And dies away like rain . . .
We walk through subterranean caves again,—
Vaguely above us feeling
A shadowy weight of frescoes on the ceiling,
Strange half-lit things,
Soundless grotesques with writhing claws and wings . . .

And here a beautiful face looks down upon us;
And someone hurries before, unseen, and sings . . .
Have we seen all, I wonder, in these chambers—
Or is there yet some gorgeous vault, arched low,
Where sleeps an amazing beauty we do not know? . . .’

The question falls: we walk in silence together,
Thinking of that deep vault and of its secret . . .
This lamp, these books, this fire
Are suddenly blown away in a whistling darkness.
Deep walls crash down in the whirlwind of desire.

XII

Now, when the moon slid under the cloud
And the cold clear dark of starlight fell,
He heard in his blood the well-known bell
Tolling slowly in heavens of sound,
Slowly beating, slowly beating,
Shaking its pulse on the stagnant air:
Sometimes it swung completely round,
Horribly gasping as if for breath;
Falling down with an anguished cry . . .
Now the red bat, he mused, will fly;
Something is marked, this night, for death . .
And while he mused, along his blood
Flew ghostly voices, remote and thin,
They rose in the cavern of his brain,
Like ghosts they died away again;
And hands upon his heart were laid,
And music upon his flesh was played,
Until, as he was bidden to do,
He walked the wood he so well knew.
Through the cold dew he moved his feet,
And heard far off, as under the earth,
Discordant music in shuddering tones,
Screams of laughter, horrible mirth,
Clapping of hands, and thudding of drums,
And the long-drawn wail of one in pain.
To-night, he thought, I shall die again,

We shall die again in the red-eyed fire
 To meet on the edge of the wood beyond
 With the placid gaze of fed desire . . .
 He walked; and behind the whisper of trees,
 In and out, one walked with him:
 She parted the branches and peered at him,
 Through lowered lids her two eyes burned,
 He heard her breath, he saw her hand,
 Wherever he turned his way, she turned:
 Kept pace with him, now fast, now slow;
 Moving her white knees as he moved . . .
 This is the one I have always loved;
 This is the one whose bat-soul comes
 To dance with me, flesh to flesh,
 In the starlight dance of horns and drums . . .

The walls and roofs, the scarlet towers,
 Sank down behind a rushing sky.
 He heard a sweet song just begun
 Abruptly shatter in tones and die.
 It whirled away. Cold silence fell.
 And again came tollings of a bell.

.

This air is alive with witches: the white witch rides
 Swifter than smoke on the starlit wind.
 In the clear darkness, while the moon hides,
 They come like dreams, like something remembered . . .
 Let us hurry! beloved; take my hand,
 Forget these things that trouble your eyes,
 Forget, forget! Our flesh is changed,
 Lighter than smoke we wreathe and rise . . .

The cold air hisses between us . . . Beloved, beloved,
 What was the word you said?
 Something about clear music that sang through water . . .
 I cannot remember. The storm-drops break on the leaves.
 Something was lost in the darkness. Someone is dead.
 Someone lies in the garden and grieves.
 Look how the branches are tossed in this air,

Flinging their green to the earth!
 Black clouds rush to devour the stars in the sky,
 The moon stares down like a half-closed eye.
 The leaves are scattered, the birds are blown,
 Oaks crash down in the darkness,
 We run from our windy shadows; we are running alone.

.

The moon was darkened: across it flew
 The swift grey tenebrous shape he knew,
 Like a thing of smoke it crossed the sky,
 The witch! he said. And he heard a cry,
 And another came, and another came,
 And one, grown duskily red with blood,
 Floated an instant across the moon,
 Hung like a dull fantastic flame . . .
 The earth has veins: they throb to-night,
 The earth swells warm beneath my feet,
 The tips of the trees grow red and bright,
 The leaves are swollen, I feel them beat,
 They press together, they push and sigh,
 They listen to hear the great-bat cry,
 The great red bat with the woman's face . . .
 Hurry! he said. And pace for pace
 That other, who trod the dark with him,
 Crushed the live leaves, reached out white hands
 And closed her eyes, the better to see
 The priests with claws, the lovers with hooves,
 The fire-lit rock, the sarabands.
 I am here! she said. The bough he broke—
 Was it the snapping bough that spoke?
 I am here! she said. The white thigh gleamed
 Cold in starlight among dark leaves,
 The head thrown backward as he had dreamed,
 The shadowy red deep jasper mouth;
 And the lifted hands, and the virgin breasts,
 Passed beside him, and vanished away.
 I am here! she cried. He answered 'Stay!'
 And laughter arose, and near and far
 Answering laughter rose and died . . .

Who is there? in the dark? he cried.
 He stood in terror, and heard a sound
 Of terrible hooves on the hollow ground;
 They rushed, were still; a silence fell;
 And he heard deep tollings of a bell.

.
 Look, beloved! Why do you hide your face?
 Look, in the centre there, above the fire,
 They are bearing the boy who blasphemed love!
 They are playing a piercing music upon him
 With a bow of living wire! . . .
 The virgin harlot sings,
 She leans above the beautiful anguished body,
 And draws slow music from those strings.
 They dance around him, they fling red roses upon him,
 They trample him with their naked feet,
 His cries are lost in laughter,
 Their feet grow dark with his blood, they beat and beat,
 They dance upon him, until he cries no more . . .
 Have we not heard that cry before?
 Somewhere, somewhere,
 Beside a sea, in the green evening,
 Beneath green clouds, in a copper sky . . .
 Was it you? was it I?
 They have quenched the fires, they dance in the darkness,
 The satyrs have run among them to seize and tear,
 Look! he has caught one by the hair,
 She screams and falls, he bears her away with him,
 And the night grows full of whistling wings.
 Far off, one voice, serene and sweet,
 Rises and sings . . .

'By the clear waters where once I died,
 In the calm evening bright with stars. . . .'
 Where have I heard these words? Was it you who sang them?
 It was long ago.
 Let us hurry, beloved! the hard hooves trample;
 The treetops tremble and glow.

.

In the clear dark, on silent wings,
 The red bat hovers beneath her moon;
 She drops through the fragrant night, and clings
 Fast in the shadow, with hands like claws,
 With soft eyes closed and mouth that feeds,
 To the young white flesh that warmly bleeds.
 The maidens circle in dance, and raise
 From lifting throats, a soft-sung praise;
 Their knees and breasts are white and bare,
 They have hung pale roses in their hair,
 Each of them as she dances by
 Peers at the blood with a narrowed eye.
 See how the red wing wraps him round,
 See how the white youth struggles in vain!
 The weak arms writhe in a soundless pain;
 He writhes in the soft red veiny wings,
 But still she whispers upon him and clings. . . .
 This is the secret feast of love,
 Look well, look well, before it dies,
 See how the red one trembles above,
 See how quiet the white one lies! . . .

Wind through the trees . . . and a voice is heard
 Singing far off. The dead leaves fall. . . .
 'By the clear waters where once I died,
 In the calm evening bright with stars,
 One among numberless avatars,
 I wedded a mortal, a mortal bride,
 And lay on the stones and gave my flesh,
 And entered the hunger of him I loved.
 How shall I ever escape this mesh
 Or be from my lover's body removed?'
 Dead leaves stream through the hurrying air
 And the maenads dance with flying hair.

.

The priests with hooves, the lovers with horns,
 Rise in the starlight, one by one,
 They draw their knives on the spurting throats,
 They smear the column with blood of goats,
 They dabble the blood on hair and lips

And wait like stones for the moon's eclipse.
 They stand like stones and stare at the sky
 Where the moon leers down like a half-closed eye. . . .
 In the green moonlight still they stand
 While wind flows over the darkened sand
 And brood on the soft forgotten things
 That filled their shadowy yesterdays. . . .
 Where are the breasts, the scarlet wings? . . .
 They gaze at each other with troubled gaze. . . .
 And then, as the shadow closes the moon,
 Shout, and strike with their hooves the ground,
 And rush through the dark, and fill the night
 With a slowly dying clamor of sound.

There, where the great walls crowd the stars,
 There, by the black wind-riven walls,
 In a grove of twisted leafless trees. . . .
 Who are these pilgrims, who are these,
 These three, the one of whom stands upright,
 While one lies weeping and one of them crawls?
 The face that he turned was a wounded face,
 I heard the dripping of blood on stones. . . .
 Hooves had trampled and torn this place,
 And the leaves were strewn with blood and bones.
 Sometimes, I think, beneath my feet,
 The warm earth stretches herself and sighs. . . .
 Listen! I heard the slow heart beat. . . .
 I will lie on this grass as a lover lies
 And reach to the north and reach to the south
 And seek in the darkness for her mouth.

.
 Beloved, beloved, where the slow waves of the wind
 Shatter pale foam among great trees,
 Under the hurrying stars, under the heaving arches,
 Like one whirled down under shadowy seas,
 I run to find you, I run and cry,
 Where are you? Where are you? It is I. It is I.
 It is your eyes I seek, it is your hair,
 Your starlight body that breathes in the darkness there.
 Under the darkness I feel you stirring. . . .

Is this you? Is this you?
 Bats in this air go whirring. . . .
 And this soft mouth that darkly meets my mouth,
 Is this the soft mouth I knew?
 Darkness, and wind in the tortured trees;
 And the patter of dew.

.
 Dance! Dance! Dance! Dance!
 Dance till the brain is red with speed!
 Dance till you fall! Lift your torches!
 Kiss your lovers until they bleed!
 Backward I draw your anguished hair
 Until your eyes are stretched with pain;
 Backward I press you until you cry,
 Your lips grow white, I kiss you again,
 I will take a torch and set you afire,
 I will break your body and fling it away. . . .
 Look, you are trembling. . . . Lie still, beloved!
 Lock your hands in my hair, and say
 Darling! darling! darling! darling!
 All night long till the break of day.

Is it your heart I hear beneath me. . . .
 Or the far tolling of that tower?
 The voices are still that cried around us. . . .
 The woods grow still for the sacred hour.
 Rise, white lover! the day dawns near.
 The grey trees lean to the east in fear.
 'By the clear waters where once I died. . . .'
 Beloved, whose voice was this that cried?
 'By the clear waters that reach the sun,
 By the clear waves that starward run . . .
 I found love's body and lost his soul,
 And crumbled in flame that should have annealed. . . .
 How shall I ever again be whole,
 By what dark waters shall I be healed?'

Silence . . . the red leaves, one by one,
 Fall. Far off, the maenads run.

Silence. Beneath my naked feet
 The veins of the red earth swell and beat.
 The dead leaves sigh on the troubled air,
 Far off the maenads bind their hair. . . .
 Hurry, beloved! the day comes soon.
 The fire is drawn from the heart of the moon.

.
 The great bell cracks and falls at last.
 The moon whirls out. The sky grows still.
 Look, how the white cloud crosses the stars
 And suddenly drops behind the hill!
 Your eyes are placid, you smile at me,
 We sit in the room by candle-light.
 We peer in each other's veins and see
 No sign of the things we saw this night.
 Only, a song is in your ears,
 A song you have heard, you think, in dream:
 The song which only the demon hears,
 In the dark forest where maenads scream . . .

'By the clear waters where once I died . . .
 In the calm evening bright with stars . . .'
 What do the strange words mean? you say,—
 And touch my hand, and turn away.

XIII

The half-shut doors through which we heard that music
 Are softly closed. Horns mutter down to silence.
 The stars whirl out, the night grows deep.
 Darkness settles upon us. A vague refrain
 Drowsily teases at the drowsy brain.
 In numberless rooms we stretch ourselves and sleep.

Where have we been? What savage chaos of music
 Whirls in our dreams?—We suddenly rise in darkness,
 Open our eyes, cry out, and sleep once more.
 We dream we are numberless sea-waves languidly foaming
 A warm white moonlit shore;

Or clouds blown windily over a sky at midnight,
 Or chords of music scattered in hurrying darkness,
 Or a singing sound of rain . . .
 We open our eyes and stare at the coiling darkness,
 And enter our dreams again.

PART IV

I

'This envelope you say has something in it
 Which once belonged to your dead son—or something
 He knew, was fond of? Something he remembers?—
 The soul flies far, and we can only call it
 By things like these . . . a photograph, a letter,
 Ribbon, or charm, or watch . . .'

. . . Wind flows softly, the long slow even wind,
 Over the low roofs white with snow;
 Wind blows, bearing cold clouds over the ocean,
 One by one they melt and flow,—

Streaming one by one over trees and towers,
 Coiling and gleaming in shafts of sun;
 Wind flows, bearing clouds; the hurrying shadows
 Flow under them one by one . . .

' . . . A spirit darkens before me . . . it is the spirit
 Which in the flesh you called your son . . . A spirit
 Young and strong and beautiful . . .
 He says that he is happy, is much honored;
 Forgives and is forgiven . . . rain and wind
 Do not perplex him . . . storm and dust forgotten . . .
 The glittering wheels in wheels of time are broken
 And laid aside . . .'

'Ask him why he did the thing he did!'

'He is unhappy. This thing, he says, transcends you:
 Dust cannot hold what shines beyond the dust . . .

What seems calamity is less than a sigh;
What seems disgrace is nothing.'

'Ask him if the one he hurt is there,
And if she loves him still!'

'He tells you she is there, and loves him still,—
Not as she did, but as all spirits love . . .
A cloud of spirits has gathered about him.
They praise him and call him, they do him honor;
He is more beautiful, he shines upon them.'

. . . Wind flows softly, the long deep tremulous wind,
Over the low roofs white with snow. . . .
Wind flows, bearing dreams; they gather and vanish,
One by one they sing and flow;

Over the outstretched lands of days remembered,
Over remembered tower and wall,
One by one they gather and talk in the darkness,
Rise and glimmer and fall . . .

'Ask him why he did the thing he did!
He knows I will understand!'

'It is too late:
He will not hear me: I have lost my power.'

'Three times I've asked him! He will never tell me.
God have mercy upon him. I will ask no more.'

II

The door is shut. She leaves the curtained office,
And down the grey-walled stairs comes trembling slowly
Towards the dazzling street.
Her withered hand clings tightly to the railing.
The long stairs rise and fall beneath her feet.

Here in the brilliant sun we jostle, waiting
To tear her secret out. . . . We laugh, we hurry,

We go our way, revolving, sinister, slow.
She blinks in the sun, and then steps faintly downward.
We whirl her away, we shout, we spin, we flow.

Where have you been, old lady? We know your secret!—
Voices jangle about her, jeers, and laughter. . . .
She trembles, tries to hurry, averts her eyes.
Tell us the truth, old lady! where have you been?
She turns and turns, her brain grows dark with cries.

Look at the old fool tremble! She's been paying,—
Paying good money, too,—to talk to spirits. . . .
She thinks she's heard a message from one dead!
What did he tell you? Is he well and happy?
Don't lie to us—we all know what he said.

He said the one he murdered once still loves him;
He said the wheels in wheels of time are broken;
And dust and storm forgotten; and all forgiven. . . .
But what you asked he wouldn't tell you, though,—
Ha ha! there's one thing you will never know!
That's what you get for meddling so with heaven!

Where have you been, old lady? Where are you going?
We know, we know! She's been to gab with spirits.
Look at the old fool! getting ready to cry!
What have you got in an envelope, old lady?
A lock of hair? An eyelash from his eye?

How do you know the medium didn't fool you?
Perhaps he had no spirit—perhaps he killed it.
Here she comes! the old fool's lost her son.
What did he have—blue eyes and golden hair?
We know your secret! what's done is done.

Look out, you'll fall—and fall, if you're not careful,
Right into an open grave . . . but what's the hurry?
You don't think you will find him when you're dead?
Cry! Cry! Look at her mouth all twisted,—
Look at her eyes all red!

We know you—know your name and all about you,
All you remember and think, and all you scheme for.
We tear your secret out, we leave you, go
Laughingly down the street. . . . Die, if you want to!
Die, then, if you're in such a hurry to know!—

. . . She falls. We lift her head. The wasted body
Weighs nothing in our hands. Does no one know her?
Was no one with her when she fell? . . .
We eddy about her, move away in silence.
We hear slow tollings of a bell.

III

Well, as you say, we live for small horizons:
We move in crowds, we flow and talk together,
Seeing so many eyes and hands and faces,
So many mouths, and all with secret meanings,—
Yet know so little of them; only seeing
The small bright circle of our consciousness,
Beyond which lies the dark. Some few we know—
Or think we know. . . . Once, on a sun-bright morning,
I walked in a certain hallway, trying to find
A certain door: I found one, tried it, opened,
And there in a spacious chamber, brightly lighted,
A hundred men played music, loudly, swiftly,
While one tall woman sent her voice above them
In powerful sweetness. . . . Closing then the door
I heard it die behind me, fade to whisper,—
And walked in a quiet hallway as before.
Just such a glimpse, as through that opened door,
Is all we know of those we call our friends. . . .
We hear a sudden music, see a playing
Of ordered thoughts—and all again is silence.
The music, we suppose, (as in ourselves)
Goes on forever there, behind shut doors,—
As it continues after our departure,
So, we divine, it played before we came . . .
What do you know of me, or I of you? . . .
Little enough. . . . We set these doors ajar

Only for chosen movements of the music:
This passage, (so I think—yet this is guesswork)
Will please him,—it is in a strain he fancies,—
More brilliant, though, than his; and while he likes it
He will be piqued. . . . He looks at me bewildered
And thinks (to judge from self—this too is guesswork)
The music strangely subtle, deep in meaning,
Perplexed with implications; he suspects me
Of hidden riches, unexpected wisdom. . . .
Or else I let him hear a lyric passage,—
Simple and clear; and all the while he listens
I make pretence to think my doors are closed.
This too bewilders him. He eyes me sidelong
Wondering 'Is he such a fool as this?
Or only mocking?'—There I let it end. . . .
Sometimes, of course, and when we least suspect it—
When we pursue our thoughts with too much passion,
Talking with too great zeal—our doors fly open
Without intention; and the hungry watcher
Stares at the feast, carries away our secrets,
And laughs . . . but this, for many counts, is seldom.
And for the most part we vouchsafe our friends,
Our lovers too, only such few clear notes
As we shall deem them likely to admire:
'Praise me for this' we say, or 'laugh at this,'
Or 'marvel at my candor' . . . all the while
Withholding what's most precious to ourselves,—
Some sinister depth of lust or fear or hatred,
The sombre note that gives the chord its power;
Or a white loveliness—if such we know—
Too much like fire to speak of without shame.

Well, this being so, and we who know it being
So curious about those well-locked houses,
The minds of those we know,—to enter softly,
And steal from floor to floor up shadowy stairways,
From room to quiet room, from wall to wall,
Breathing deliberately the very air,
Pressing our hands and nerves against warm darkness
To learn what ghosts are there,—
Suppose for once I set my doors wide open

And bid you in. . . . Suppose I try to tell you
The secrets of this house, and how I live here;
Suppose I tell you who I am, in fact. . . .
Deceiving you—as far as I may know it—
Only so much as I deceive myself.

If you are clever you already see me
As one who moves forever in a cloud
Of warm bright vanity: a luminous cloud
Which falls on all things with a quivering magic,
Changing such outlines as a light may change,
Brightening what lies dark to me, concealing
Those things that will not change . . . I walk sustained
In a world of things that flatter me: a sky
Just as I would have had it; trees and grass
Just as I would have shaped and colored them;
Pigeons and clouds and sun and whirling shadows,
And stars that brightening climb through mist at nightfall,—
In some deep way I am aware these praise me:
Where they are beautiful, or hint of beauty,
They point, somehow, to me. . . . This water says,—
Shimmering at the sky, or undulating
In broken gleaming parodies of clouds,
Rippled in blue, or sending from cool depths
To meet the falling leaf the leaf's clear image,—
This water says, there is some secret in you
Akin to my clear beauty, beauty swaying
To mirror beauty, silently responsive
To all that circles you. This bare tree says,—
Austere and stark and leafless, split with frost,
Resonant in the wind, with rigid branches
Flung out against the sky,—this tall tree says,
There is some cold austerity in you,
A frozen strength, with long roots gnarled on rocks,
Fertile and deep; you bide your time, are patient,
Serene in silence, bare to outward seeming,
Concealing what reserves of power and beauty!
What teeming Aprils!—chorus of leaves on leaves!
These houses say, such walls in walls as ours,
Such streets of walls, solid and smooth of surface,
Such hills and cities of walls, walls upon walls;

Motionless in the sun, or dark with rain;
Walls pierced with windows, where the light may enter;
Walls windowless where darkness is desired;
Towers and labyrinths and domes and chambers,—
Amazing deep recesses, dark on dark,—
All these are like the walls which shape your spirit:
You move, are warm, within them, laugh within them,
Proud of their depth and strength; or sally from them,
When you are bold, to blow great horns at the world. . . .
This deep cool room, with shadowed walls and ceiling,
Tranquil and cloistral, fragrant of my mind,
This cool room says,—just such a room have you,
It waits you always at the tops of stairways,
Withdrawn, remote, familiar to your uses,
Where you may cease pretence and be yourself. . . .
And this embroidery, hanging on this wall,
Hung there forever,—these so soundless glidings
Of dragons golden-scaled, sheer birds of azure,
Coiling of leaves in pale vermillion, griffins
Drawing their rainbow wings through involutions
Of mauve chrysanthemums and lotus flowers,—
This goblin wood where someone cries enchantment,—
This says, just such an involuted beauty
Of thought and coiling thought, dream linked with dream,
Image to image gliding, wreathing fires,
Soundlessly cries enchantment in your mind:
You need but sit and close your eyes a moment
To see these deep designs unfold themselves.

And so, all things discern me, name me, praise me—
I walk in a world of silent voices, praising;
And in this world you see me like a wraith
Blown softly here and there, on silent winds.
'Praise me'—I say; and look, not in a glass,
But in your eyes, to see my image there—
Or in your mind; you smile, I am contented;
You look at me, with interest unfeigned,
And listen—I am pleased; or else, alone,
I watch thin bubbles veering brightly upward
From unknown depths,—my silver thoughts ascending;
Saying now this, now that, hinting of all things,—

Dreams, and desires, velleities, regrets,
 Faint ghosts of memory, strange recognitions,—
 But all with one deep meaning: this is I,
 This is the glistening secret holy I,
 This silver-wingèd wonder, insubstantial,
 This singing ghost. . . . And hearing, I am warmed.

.

You see me moving, then, as one who moves
 Forever at the centre of his circle:
 A circle filled with light. And into it
 Come bulging shapes from darkness, loom gigantic,
 Or huddle in dark again. . . . A clock ticks clearly,
 A gas-jet steadily whirs, light streams across me;
 Two church bells, with alternate beat, strike nine;
 And through these things my pencil pushes softly
 To weave grey webs of lines on this clear page.
 Snow falls and melts; the eaves make liquid music;
 Black wheel-tracks line the snow-touched street; I turn
 And look one instant at the half-dark gardens,
 Where skeleton elm-trees reach with frozen gesture
 Above unsteady lamps,—the black boughs flung
 Against a luminous snow-filled grey-gold sky.
 'Beauty!' I cry. . . . My feet move on, and take me
 Between dark walls, with orange squares for windows.
 Beauty; beheld like someone half-forgotten,
 Remembered, with slow pang, as one neglected . . .
 Well, I am frustrate; life has beaten me,
 The thing I strongly seized has turned to darkness,
 And darkness rides my heart. . . . These skeleton elm-trees—
 Leaning against that grey-gold snow-filled sky—
 Beauty! they say, and at the edge of darkness
 Extend vain arms in a frozen gesture of protest . . .
 A clock ticks softly; a gas-jet steadily whirs:
 The pencil meets its shadow upon clear paper,
 Voices are raised, a door is slammed. The lovers,
 Murmuring in an adjacent room, grow silent,
 The eaves make liquid music. . . . Hours have passed,
 And nothing changes, and everything is changed.
 Exultation is dead, Beauty is harlot,—

And walks the streets. The thing I strongly seized
Has turned to darkness, and darkness rides my heart.

If you could solve this darkness you would have me.
This causeless melancholy that comes with rain,
Or on such days as this when large wet snowflakes
Drop heavily, with rain . . . whence rises this?
Well, so-and-so, this morning when I saw him,
Seemed much preoccupied, and would not smile;
And you, I saw too much; and you, too little;
And the word I chose for you, the golden word,
The word that should have struck so deep in purpose,
And set so many doors of wish wide open,
You let it fall, and would not stoop for it,
And smiled at me, and would not let me guess
Whether you saw it fall. . . . These things, together,
With other things, still slighter, wove to music,
And this in turn drew up dark memories;
And there I stand. This music breaks and bleeds me,
Turning all frustrate dreams to chords and discords,
Faces and griefs, and words, and sunlit evenings,
And chains self-forged that will not break nor lengthen,
And cries that none can answer, few will hear.
Have these things meaning? Or would you see more clearly
If I should say 'My second wife grows tedious,
Or, like gay tulip, keeps no perfumed secret'?
Or 'one day dies eventless as another,
Leaving the seeker still unsatisfied,
And more convinced life yields no satisfaction'?
Or 'seek too hard, the sight at length grows callous,
And beauty shines in vain'?—

These things you ask for,
These you shall have. . . . So, talking with my first wife,
At the dark end of evening, when she leaned
And smiled at me, with blue eyes weaving webs
Of finest fire, revolving me in scarlet,—
Calling to mind remote and small successions
Of countless other evenings ending so,—
I smiled, and met her kiss, and wished her dead;
Dead of a sudden sickness, or by my hands

Savagely killed; I saw her in her coffin,
 I saw her coffin borne downstairs with trouble,
 I saw myself alone there, palely watching,
 Wearing a masque of grief so deeply acted
 That grief itself possessed me. Time would pass,
 And I should meet this girl,—my second wife—
 And drop the masque of grief for one of passion.
 Forward we move to meet, half hesitating.
 We drown in each other's eyes, we laugh, we talk,
 Looking now here, now there, faintly pretending
 We do not hear the powerful pulsing prelude
 Mounting beneath our words. . . . The time approaches.
 We lean unbalanced. The mute last glance between us,
 Profoundly searching, opening, asking, yielding,
 Is steadily met: our two lives draw together. . . .
 . . . 'What are you thinking of?' . . . My first wife's voice
 Scattered these ghosts. 'Oh nothing—nothing much—
 Just wondering where we'd be two years from now,
 And what we might be doing. . . .' And then remorse
 Turned sharply in my mind to sudden pity,
 And pity to echoed love. And one more evening
 Drew to the usual end of sleep and silence.

And, as it is with this, so too with all things.
 The pages of our lives are blurred palimpsest:
 New lines are wreathed on old lines half-erased,
 And those on older still; and so forever.
 The old shines through the new, and colors it.
 What's new? What's old? All things have double meanings,—
 All things return. I write a line with passion
 (Or touch a woman's hand, or plumb a doctrine)
 Only to find the same thing, done before,—
 Only to know the same thing comes to-morrow. . . .
 This curious riddled dream I dreamed last night,—
 Six years ago I dreamed it just as now;
 The same man stooped to me; we rose from darkness,
 And broke the accustomed order of our days,
 And struck for the morning world, and warmth, and free-
 dom. . . .
 What does it mean? Why is this hint repeated?
 What darkness does it spring from, seek to end?

You see me, then, pass up and down these stairways,
Now through a beam of light, and now through shadow,—
Pursuing silent ends. No rest there is,—
No more for me than you. I move here always,
From quiet room to room, from wall to wall,
Searching and plotting, weaving a web of days.
This is my house, and now, perhaps, you know me. . . .
Yet I confess, for all my best intentions,
Once more I have deceived you. . . . I withhold
The one thing precious, the one dark thing that guides me;
And I have spread two snares for you, of lies.

IV

He, in the room above, grown old and tired,
She, in the room below—his floor her ceiling—
Pursue their separate dreams. He turns his light,
And throws himself on the bed, face down, in laughter. . . .
She, by the window, smiles at a starlight night.

His watch—the same he has heard these cycles of ages—
Wearily chimes at seconds beneath his pillow.
The clock, upon her mantelpiece, strikes nine.
The night wears on. She hears dull steps above her.
The world whirs on. . . . New stars come up to shine.

His youth—far off—he sees it brightly walking
In a golden cloud. . . . Wings flashing about it. . . . Darkness
Walls it around with dripping enormous walls.
Old age—far off—her death—what do they matter?
Down the smooth purple night a streaked star falls. ✓

She hears slow steps in the street—they chime like music;
They climb to her heart, they break and flower in beauty,
Along her veins they glisten and ring and burn. . . .
He hears his own slow steps tread down to silence.
Far off they pass. He knows they will never return.

Far off—on a smooth dark road—he hears them faintly.
The road, like a sombre river, quietly flowing,

Moves among murmurous walls. A deeper breath
Swells them to sound: he hears his steps more clearly.
And death seems nearer to him: or he to death.

What's death?—She smiles. The cool stone hurts her elbows.
The last of the rain-drops gather and fall from elm-boughs,
She sees them glisten and break. The arc-lamp sings,
The new leaves dip in the warm wet air and fragrance.
A sparrow whirs to the eaves, and shakes his wings.

What's death—what's death? The spring returns like music,
The trees are like dark lovers who dream in starlight,
The soft grey clouds go over the stars like dreams.
The cool stone wounds her arms to pain, to pleasure.
Under the lamp a circle of wet street gleams. . . .

And death seems far away, a thing of roses,
A golden portal, where golden music closes,
Death seems far away:
And spring returns, the countless singing of lovers,
And spring returns to stay. . . .

He, in the room above, grown old and tired,
Flings himself on the bed, face down, in laughter,
And clenches his hands, and remembers, and desires to die.
And she, by the window, smiles at a night of starlight.
. . . The soft grey clouds go slowly across the sky.

V

No, I shall not say why it is that I love you—
Why do you ask me, save for vanity?
Surely you would not have me, like a mirror,
Say 'yes,—your hair curls darkly back from the temples,
Your mouth has a humorous, tremulous, half-shy sweetness,
Your eyes are April grey . . . with jonquils in them?'
No, if I tell at all, I shall tell in silence . . .
I'll say—my childhood broke through chords of music
—Or were they chords of sun?—wherein fell shadows,
Or silences; I rose through seas of sunlight;

Or sometimes found a darkness stooped above me
With wings of death, and a face of cold clear beauty . . .
I lay in the warm sweet grass on a blue May morning,
My chin in a dandelion, my hands in clover,
And drowsed there like a bee . . . blue days behind me
Stretched like a chain of deep blue pools of magic,
Enchanted, silent, timeless . . . days before me
Murmured of blue-sea mornings, noons of gold,
Green evenings streaked with lilac, bee-starred nights.
Confused soft clouds of music fled above me.
Sharp shafts of music dazzled my eyes and pierced me.
I ran and turned and spun and danced in the sunlight,
Shrank, sometimes, from the freezing silence of beauty,
Or crept once more to the warm white cave of sleep.

No, I shall not say 'this is why I praise you—
Because you say such wise things, or such foolish . . .'
You would not have me say what you know better?
Let me instead be silent, only saying—:
My childhood lives in me—or half-lives, rather—
And, if I close my eyes cool chords of music
Flow up to me . . . long chords of wind and sunlight. . . .
Shadows of intricate vines on sunlit walls,
Deep bells beating, with aeons of blue between them,
Grass blades leagues apart with worlds between them,
Walls rushing up to heaven with stars upon them . . .
I lay in my bed and through the tall night window
Saw the green lightning plunging among the clouds,
And heard the harsh rain storm at the panes and roof. . . .
How should I know—how should I now remember—
What half-dreamed great wings curved and sang above me?
What wings like swords? What eyes with the dread night in
them?

This I shall say.—I lay by the hot white sand-dunes:
Small yellow flowers, sapless and squat and spiny,
Stared at the sky. And silently there above us
Day after day, beyond our dreams and knowledge,
Presences swept, and over us streamed their shadows,
Swift and blue, or dark. . . . What did they mean?
What sinister threat of power? What hint of beauty?

Prelude to what gigantic music, or subtle?
Only I know these things leaned over me,
Brooded upon me, paused, went flowing softly,
Glided and passed. I loved, I desired, I hated,
I struggled, I yielded and loved, was warmed to blossom . . .
You, when your eyes have evening sunlight in them,
Set these dunes before me, these salt bright flowers,
These presences. . . . I drowse, they stream above me,
I struggle, I yield and love, I am warmed to dream.

You are the window (if I could tell I'd tell you)
Through which I see a clear far world of sunlight.
You are the silence (if you could hear you'd hear me)
In which I remember a thin still whisper of singing.
It is not you I laugh for, you I touch!
My hands, that touch you, suddenly touch white cobwebs,
Coldly silvered, heavily silvered with dewdrops;
And clover, heavy with rain; and cold green grass.

VI

As evening falls,
The walls grow luminous and warm, the walls
Tremble and glow with the lives within them moving,
Moving like music, secret and rich and warm.
How shall we live to-night, where shall we turn?
To what new light or darkness yearn?
A thousand winding stairs lead down before us;
And one by one in myriads we descend
By lamplit flowered walls, long balustrades,
Through half-lit halls which reach no end. . . .

Take my arm, then, you or you or you,
And let us walk abroad on the solid air:
Look how the organist's head, in silhouette,
Leans to the lamplit music's orange square! . . .
The dim-globed lamps illumine rows of faces,
Rows of hands and arms and hungry eyes,
They have hurried down from a myriad secret places,
From windy chambers next to the skies. . . .

The music comes upon us . . . it shakes the darkness,
It shakes the darkness in our minds. . . .
And brilliant figures suddenly fill the darkness,
Down the white shaft of light they run through darkness,
And in our hearts a dazzling dream unwinds . . .

Take my hand, then, walk with me
By the slow soundless crashings of a sea
Down miles on miles of glistening mirrorlike sand,—
Take my hand
And walk with me once more by crumbling walls;
Up mouldering stairs where grey-stemmed ivy clings,
To hear forgotten bells, as evening falls,
Rippling above us invisibly their slowly widening rings. . . .
Did you once love me? Did you bear a name?
Did you once stand before me without shame? . . .
Take my hand: your face is one I know,
I loved you, long ago:
You are like music, long forgotten, suddenly come to mind;
You are like spring returned through snow.
Once, I know, I walked with you in starlight,
And many nights I slept and dreamed of you;
Come, let us climb once more these stairs of starlight,
This midnight stream of cloud-flung blue! . . .
Music murmurs beneath us like a sea,
And faints to a ghostly whisper . . . Come with me.

Are you still doubtful of me—hesitant still,
Fearful, perhaps, that I may yet remember
What you would gladly, if you could, forget?
You were unfaithful once, you met your lover;
Still in your heart you bear that red-eyed ember;
And I was silent,—you remember my silence yet . . .
You knew, as well as I, I could not kill him,
Nor touch him with hot hands, nor yet with hate.
No, and it was not you I saw with anger.
Instead, I rose and beat at steel-walled fate,
Cried till I lay exhausted, sick, unfriended,
That life, so seeming sure, and love, so certain,
Should loose such tricks, be so abruptly ended,
Ring down so suddenly an unlooked-for curtain.

How could I find it in my heart to hurt you,
You, whom this love could hurt much more than I?
No, you were pitiful, and I gave you pity;
And only hated you when I saw you cry.
We were two dupes; if I could give forgiveness,—
Had I the right,—I should forgive you now . . .
We were two dupes. . . . Come, let us walk in starlight,
And feed our griefs: we do not break, but bow.

Take my hand, then, come with me
By the white shadowy crashing of a sea . . .
Look how the long volutes of foam unfold
To spread their mottled shimmer along the sand! . . .
Take my hand,
Do not remember how these depths are cold,
Nor how, when you are dead,
Green leagues of sea will glimmer above your head.
You lean your face upon your hands and cry,
The blown sand whispers about your feet,
Terrible seems it now to die,—
Terrible now, with life so incomplete,
To turn away from the balconies and the music,
The sunlit afternoons,
To hear behind you there a far-off laughter
Lost in a stirring of sand among dry dunes . . .
Die not sadly, you whom life has beaten!
Lift your face up, laughing, die like a queen!
Take cold flowers of foam in your warm white fingers!
Death's but a change of sky from blue to green . . .

As evening falls,
The walls grow luminous and warm, the walls
Tremble and glow . . . the music breathes upon us,
The rayed white shaft plays over our heads like magic,
And to and fro we move and lean and change . . .
You, in a world grown strange,
Laugh at a darkness, clench your hands despairing,
Smash your glass on the floor, no longer caring,
Sink suddenly down and cry . . .
You hear the applause that greets your latest rival,
You are forgotten: your rival—who knows?—is I . . .

I laugh in the warm bright light of answering laughter,
I am inspired and young . . . and though I see
You sitting alone there, dark, with shut eyes crying,
I bask in the light, and in your hate of me . . .
Failure . . . well, the time comes soon or later . . .
The night must come . . . and I'll be one who clings,
Desperately, to hold the applause, one instant,—
To keep some youngster waiting in the wings.

The music changes tone . . . a room is darkened,
Someone is moving . . . the crack of white light widens,
And all is dark again; till suddenly falls
A wandering disk of light on floor and walls,
Winks out, returns again, climbs and descends,
Gleams on a clock, a glass, shrinks back to darkness;
And then at last, in the chaos of that place,
Dazzles like frozen fire on your clear face.
Well, I have found you. We have met at last.
Now you shall not escape me: in your eyes
I see the horrible huddlings of your past,—
All you remember blackens, utters cries,
Reaches far hands and faint. I hold the light
Close to your cheek, watch the pained pupils shrink,—
Watch the vile ghosts of all you vilely think . . .
Now all the hatreds of my life have met
To hold high carnival . . . we do not speak,
My fingers find the well-loved throat they seek,
And press, and fling you down . . . and then forget.

Who plays for me? What sudden drums keep time
To the ecstatic rhythm of my crime?
What flute shrills out as moonlight strikes the floor? . . .
What violin so faintly cries
Seeing how strangely in the moon he lies? . . .
The room grows dark once more,
The crack of white light narrows around the door,
And all is silent, except a slow complaining
Of flutes and violins, like music waning.

Take my hand, then, walk with me
By the slow soundless crashings of a sea . . .

Look, how white these shells are, on this sand!

Take my hand,

And watch the waves run inward from the sky

Line upon foaming line to plunge and die.

The music that bound our lives is lost behind us,

Paltry it seems . . . here in this wind-swung place

Motionless under the sky's vast vault of azure

We stand in a terror of beauty, face to face.

The dry grass creaks in the wind, the blown sand whispers,

The soft sand seethes on the dunes, the clear grains glisten,

Once they were rock . . . a chaos of golden boulders . . .

Now they are blown by the wind . . . we stand and listen

To the sliding of grain upon timeless grain

And feel our lives go past like a whisper of pain.

Have I not seen you, have we not met before

Here on this sun-and-sea-wrecked shore?

You shade your sea-grey eyes with a sunlit hand

And peer at me . . . far sea-gulls, in your eyes,

Flash in the sun, go down . . . I hear slow sand,

And shrink to nothing beneath blue brilliant skies . . .

.

The music ends. The screen grows dark. We hurry

To go our devious secret ways, forgetting

Those many lives. . . . We loved, we laughed, we killed,

We danced in fire, we drowned in a whirl of sea-waves.

The flutes are stilled, and a thousand dreams are stilled.

Whose body have I found beside dark waters,

The cold white body, garlanded with sea-weed?

Staring with wide eyes at the sky?

I bent my head above it, and cried in silence.

Only the things I dreamed of heard my cry.

Once I loved, and she I loved was darkened.

Again I loved, and love itself was darkened.

Vainly we follow the circle of shadowy days.

The screen at last grows dark, the flutes are silent.

The doors of night are closed. We go our ways.

VII

The sun goes down in a cold pale flare of light.
The trees grow dark: the shadows lean to the east:
And lights wink out through the windows, one by one.
A clamor of frosty sirens mourns at the night.
Pale slate-grey clouds whirl up from the sunken sun.

And the wandering one, the inquisitive dreamer of dreams,
The eternal asker of answers, stands in the street,
And lifts his palms for the first cold ghost of rain.
The purple lights leap down the hill before him.
The gorgeous night has begun again.

'I will ask them all, I will ask them all their dreams,
I will hold my light above them and seek their faces,
I will hear them whisper, invisible in their veins. . . .'
The eternal asker of answers becomes as the darkness,
Or as a wind blown over a myriad forest,
Or as the numberless voices of long-drawn rains.

We hear him and take him among us like a wind of music,
Like the ghost of a music we have somewhere heard;
We crowd through the streets in a dazzle of pallid lamplight,
We pour in a sinister mass, we ascend a stair,
With laughter and cry, with word upon murmured word,
We flow, we descend, we turn . . . and the eternal dreamer
Moves on among us like light, like evening air . . .

Good night! good night! good night! we go our ways,
The rain runs over the pavement before our feet,
The cold rain falls, the rain sings.
We walk, we run, we ride. We turn our faces
To what the eternal evening brings.

Our hands are hot and raw with the stones we have laid,
We have built a tower of stone high into the sky.
We have built a city of towers.
Our hands are light, they are singing with emptiness.
Our souls are light. They have shaken a burden of hours. . . .

What did we build it for? Was it all a dream? . . .
 Ghostly above us in lamplight the towers gleam . . .
 And after a while they will fall to dust and rain;
 Or else we will tear them down with impatient hands;
 And hew rock out of the earth, and build them again.

1916-1917.

IMPROVISATIONS: LIGHTS AND SNOW

I

The girl in the room beneath
 Before going to bed
 Strums on a mandolin
 The three simple tunes she knows.
 How inadequate they are to tell what her heart feels!
 When she has finished them several times
 She thrums the strings aimlessly with her finger-nails
 And smiles, and thinks happily of many things.

II

I stood for a long while before the shop-window
 Looking at the blue butterflies embroidered on tawny silk.
 The building was a tower before me,
 Time was loud behind me,
 Sun went over the housetops and dusty trees;
 And there they were, glistening, brilliant, motionless,
 Stitched in a golden sky
 By yellow patient fingers long since turned to dust.

III

The first bell is silver,
 And breathing darkness I think only of the long scythe of time.
 The second bell is crimson,

And I think of a holiday night, with rockets
 Furrowing the sky with red, and a soft shatter of stars.
 The third bell is saffron and slow,
 And I behold a long sunset over the sea
 With wall on wall of castled cloud and glittering balustrades.
 The fourth bell is colour of bronze,
 I walk by a frozen lake in the dun light of dusk:
 Muffled crackings run in the ice,
 Trees creak, birds fly.
 The fifth bell is cold clear azure,
 Delicately tinged with green:
 One golden star hangs melting in it,
 And towards this, sleepily, I go.
 The sixth bell is as if a pebble
 Had been dropped into a deep sea far above me . . .
 Rings of sound ebb slowly into the silence.

IV

On the day when my uncle and I drove to the cemetery,
 Rain rattled on the roof of the carriage;
 And talking constrainedly of this and that
 We refrained from looking at the child's coffin on the seat before
 us.
 When we reached the cemetery
 We found that the thin snow on the grass
 Was already darkly transparent with rain;
 And boards had been laid upon it
 That we might walk without wetting our feet.

V

When I was a boy, and saw bright rows of icicles
 In many lengths along a wall
 I was disappointed to find
 That I could not play music upon them:
 I ran my hand lightly across them
 And they fell, tinkling.
 I tell you this, young man, so that your expectations of life
 Will not be too great.

VI

It is now two hours since I left you,
And the perfume of your hands is still on my hands.
And though since then
I have looked at the stars, walked in the cold blue streets,
And heard the dead leaves blowing over the ground
Under the trees,
I still remember the sound of your laughter.
How will it be, lady, when there is none to remember you
Even as long as this?
Will the dust braid your hair?

VII

The day opens with the brown light of snowfall
And past the window snowflakes fall and fall.
I sit in my chair all day and work and work
Measuring words against each other.
I open the piano and play a tune
But find it does not say what I feel,
I grow tired of measuring words against each other,
I grow tired of these four walls,
And I think of you, who write me that you have just had a
daughter
And named her after your first sweetheart,
And you, who break your heart, far away,
In the confusion and savagery of a long war,
And you who, worn by the bitterness of winter,
Will soon go south.
The snowflakes fall almost straight in the brown light
Past my window,
And a sparrow finds refuge on my window-ledge.
This alone comes to me out of the world outside
As I measure word with word.

VIII

Many things perplex me and leave me troubled,
Many things are locked away in the white book of stars
Never to be opened by me.

The starred leaves are silently turned,
 And the mooned leaves;
 And as they are turned, fall the shadows of life and death.
 Perplexed and troubled,
 I light a small light in a small room,
 The lighted walls come closer to me,
 The familiar pictures are clear.
 I sit in my favourite chair and turn in my mind
 The tiny pages of my own life, whereon so little is written,
 And hear at the eastern window the pressure of a long wind,
 coming
 From I know not where.

How many times have I sat here,
 How many times will I sit here again,
 Thinking these same things over and over in solitude
 As a child says over and over
 The first word he has learned to say.

IX

This girl gave her heart to me,
 And this, and this.
 This one looked at me as if she loved me,
 And silently walked away.
 This one I saw once and loved, and saw her never again.

Shall I count them for you upon my fingers?
 Or like a priest solemnly sliding beads?
 Or pretend they are roses, pale pink, yellow, and white,
 And arrange them for you in a wide bowl
 To be set in sunlight?
 See how nicely it sounds as I count them for you—
 'This girl gave her heart to me
 And this, and this'. . . !
 And nevertheless my heart breaks when I think of them,
 When I think their names,
 And how, like leaves, they have changed and blown
 And will lie at last, forgotten,
 Under the snow.

X

It is night-time, and cold, and snow is falling,
And no wind grieves the walls.
In the small world of light around the arc-lamp
A swarm of snowflakes falls and falls.
The street grows silent. The last stranger passes.
The sound of his feet, in the snow, is indistinct.

What forgotten sadness is it, on a night like this,
Takes possession of my heart?
Why do I think of a camellia tree in a southern garden,
With pink blossoms among dark leaves,
Standing, surprised, in the snow?
Why do I think of spring?

The snowflakes, helplessly veering,
Fall silently past my window;
They come from darkness and enter darkness.
What is it in my heart is surprised and bewildered
Like that camellia tree,
Beautiful still in its glittering anguish?
And spring so far away!

XI

As I walked through the lamplit gardens,
On the thin white crust of snow,
So intensely was I thinking of my misfortune,
So clearly were my eyes fixed
On the face of this grief which has come to me,
That I did not notice the beautiful pale colouring
Of lamplight on the snow;
Nor the interlaced long blue shadows of trees;

And yet these things were there,
And the white lamps and orange lamps, and lamps of lilac were
there,
As I have seen them so often before;

As they will be so often again
Long after my grief is forgotten.

And still, though I know this, and say this, it cannot console me.

XII

How many times have we been interrupted
Just as I was about to make up a story for you!
One time it was because we suddenly saw a firefly
Lighting his green lantern among the boughs of a fir-tree.
Marvellous! Marvellous! He is making for himself
A little tent of light in the darkness!
And one time it was because we saw a lilac lightning flash
Run wrinkling into the blue top of the mountain,—
We heard boulders of thunder rolling down upon us
And the plat-plat of drops on the window,
And we ran to watch the rain
Charging in wavering white clouds across the long grass of the
field!

Or at other times it was because we saw a star
Slipping easily out of the sky and falling, far off,
Among pine-dark hills;
Or because we found a crimson eft
Darting in the cold grass!

These things interrupted us and left us wondering;
And the stories, whatever they might have been,
Were never told.

A fairy, binding a daisy down and laughing?
A golden-haired princess caught in a cobweb?
A love-story of long ago?
Some day, just as we are beginning again,
Just as we blow the first sweet note,
Death itself will interrupt us.

XIII

My heart is an old house, and in that forlorn old house,
In the very centre, dark and forgotten,
Is a locked room where an enchanted princess

Lies sleeping.

But sometimes, in that dark house,
As if almost from the stars, far away,
Sounds whisper in that secret room—
Faint voices, music, a dying trill of laughter?
And suddenly, from her long sleep,
The beautiful princess awakes and dances.

Who is she? I do not know.

Why does she dance? Do not ask me!—

Yet to-day, when I saw you,

When I saw your eyes troubled with the trouble of happiness,

And your mouth trembling into a smile,

And your fingers put shyly forward,—

Softly, in that room,

The little princess arose

And danced;

And as she danced the old house gravely trembled

With its vague and delicious secret.

XIV

Like an old tree uprooted by the wind

And flung down cruelly

With roots bared to the sun and stars

And limp leaves brought to earth—

Torn from its house—

So do I seem to myself

When you have left me.

XV

The music of the morning is red and warm;

Snow lies against the walls;

And on the sloping roof in the yellow sunlight

Pigeons huddle against the wind.

The music of the evening is attenuated and thin—

The moon seen through a wave by a mermaid;

The crying of a violin.

Far down there, far down where the river turns to the west,
The delicate lights begin to twinkle
On the dusky arches of the bridge:
In the green sky a long cloud,
A smouldering wave of smoky crimson,
Breaks in the freezing wind: and above it, unabashed,
Remote, untouched, fierily palpitant,
Sings the first star.

TETÉLESTAI

I

How shall we praise the magnificence of the dead,
The great man humbled, the haughty brought to dust?
Is there a horn we should not blow as proudly
For the meanest of us all, who creeps his days,
Guarding his heart from blows, to die obscurely?
I am no king, have laid no kingdoms waste,
Taken no princes captive, led no triumphs
Of weeping women through long walls of trumpets;
Say rather, I am no one, or an atom;
Say rather, two great gods, in a vault of starlight,
Play ponderingly at chess, and at the game's end
One of the pieces, shaken, falls to the floor
And runs to the darkest corner; and that piece
Forgotten there, left motionless, is I. . . .
Say that I have no name, no gifts, no power,
Am only one of millions, mostly silent;
One who came with eyes and hands and a heart,
Looked on beauty, and loved it, and then left it.
Say that the fates of time and space obscured me,
Led me a thousand ways to pain, bemused me,
Wrapped me in ugliness; and like great spiders
Dispatched me at their leisure. . . . Well, what then?
Should I not hear, as I lie down in dust,
The horns of glory blowing above my burial?

II

Morning and evening opened and closed above me:
Houses were built above me; trees let fall
Yellowing leaves upon me, hands of ghosts;
Rain has showered its arrows of silver upon me
Seeking my heart; winds have roared and tossed me;
Music in long blue waves of sound has borne me
A helpless weed to shores of unthought silence;
Time, above me, within me, crashed its gongs
Of terrible warning, sifting the dust of death;
And here I lie. Blow now your horns of glory
Harshly over my flesh, you trees, you waters!
You stars and suns, Canopus, Deneb, Rigel,
Let me, as I lie down, here in this dust,
Hear, far off, your whispered salutation!
Roar now above my decaying flesh, you winds,
Whirl out your earth-scents over this body, tell me
Of ferns and stagnant pools, wild roses, hillsides!
Anoint me, rain, let crash your silver arrows
On this hard flesh! I am the one who named you,
I lived in you, and now I die in you.
I your son, your daughter, treader of music,
Lie broken, conquered . . . Let me not fall in silence.

III

I, the restless one; the circler of circles;
Herdsman and roper of stars, who could not capture
The secret of self; I who was tyrant to weaklings,
Striker of children; destroyer of women; corrupter
Of innocent dreamers, and laughter at beauty; I,
Too easily brought to tears and weakness by music,
Baffled and broken by love, the helpless beholder
Of the war in my heart of desire with desire, the struggle
Of hatred with love, terror with hunger; I
Who laughed without knowing the cause of my laughter, who
grew
Without wishing to grow, a servant to my own body;
Loved without reason the laughter and flesh of a woman,

Enduring such torments to find her! I who at last
Grow weaker, struggle more feebly, relent in my purpose,
Choose for my triumph an easier end, look backward
At earlier conquests; or, caught in the web, cry out
In a sudden and empty despair, 'Tetélestai!'
Pity me, now! I, who was arrogant, beg you!
Tell me, as I lie down, that I was courageous.
Blow horns of victory now, as I reel and am vanquished.
Shatter the sky with trumpets above my grave.

IV

. . . Look! this flesh how it crumbles to dust and is blown!
These bones, how they grind in the granite of frost and are nothing!
This skull, how it yawns for a flicker of time in the darkness,
Yet laughs not and sees not! It is crushed by a hammer of sunlight,
And the hands are destroyed. . . . Press down through the
leaves of the jasmine,
Dig through the interlaced roots—nevermore will you find me;
I was no better than dust, yet you cannot replace me. . . .
Take the soft dust in your hand—does it stir: does it sing?
Has it lips and a heart? Does it open its eyes to the sun?
Does it run, does it dream, does it burn with a secret, or tremble
In terror of death? Or ache with tremendous decisions? . . .
Listen! . . . It says: 'I lean by the river. The willows
Are yellowed with bud. White clouds roar up from the south
And darken the ripples; but they cannot darken my heart,
Nor the face like a star in my heart! . . . Rain falls on the
water
And pelts it, and rings it with silver. The willow trees glisten,
The sparrows chirp under the eaves; but the face in my heart
Is a secret of music. . . . I wait in the rain and am silent.'
Listen again! . . . It says: 'I have worked, I am tired,
The pencil dulls in my hand: I see through the window
Walls upon walls of windows with faces behind them,
Smoke floating up to the sky, an ascension of sea-gulls.
I am tired. I have struggled in vain, my decision was fruitless,
Why then do I wait? with darkness, so easy, at hand! . . .

But tomorrow, perhaps . . . I will wait and endure till tomorrow! . . .

Or again: 'It is dark. The decision is made. I am vanquished
By terror of life. The walls mount slowly about me
In coldness. I had not the courage. I was forsaken.
I cried out, was answered by silence . . . Tetélestai! . . .'

V

Hear how it babbles!—Blow the dust out of your hand,
With its voices and visions, tread on it, forget it, turn homeward
With dreams in your brain. . . . This, then, is the humble, the
nameless,—

The lover, the husband and father, the struggler with shadows,
The one who went down under shoutings of chaos, the weakling
Who cried his 'forsaken!' like Christ on the darkening hill-
top! . . .

This, then, is the one who implores, as he dwindles to silence,
A fanfare of glory. . . . And which of us dares to deny him?

SENLIN: A BIOGRAPHY

I. HIS DARK ORIGINS

I

Senlin sits before us, and we see him . . .

He smokes his pipe before us, and we hear him . . .

Is he small, with reddish hair,

Does he light his pipe with a meditative stare,

And a pointed flame reflected in both eyes?

Is he sad and happy and foolish and wise? . . .

Did no one see him enter the doors of the city,

Looking about him at roofs and trees and skies? . . .

'I stepped from a cloud,' he says, 'as evening fell,

I walked on the sound of a bell;

I ran with winged heels along a gust;
Or is it true that I laughed and sprang from the dust? . . .
Has no one, in a great autumnal forest,
When the wind bares the trees with mournful tone,
Heard the sad horn of Senlin slowly blown? . . .
Has no one, on a mountain in the spring,
Heard Senlin sing?
Perhaps I came alone on a snow-white horse,
Riding alone from the deep-starred night.
Perhaps I came on a ship whose sails were music,
Sailing from moon or sun on a river of light.'

He lights his pipe with a streaked and pointed flame . . .
'Yet, there were many autumns before I came,
And many springs. And more will come, long after
'There is no horn from me, or song, or laughter.'

The city dissolves about us, and its walls
Become an ancient forest. There is no sound
Except where an old twig tires and falls;
Or a lizard among the dead leaves crawls;
Or a flutter is heard in darkness along the ground.
Has Senlin become a forest? Do we walk in Senlin?
Is Senlin the wood we walk in,—ourselves,—the world?
Senlin! we cry . . . Senlin! again . . . No answer,
Only soft broken echoes backward whirled . . .

Yet, we would say this is no wood at all,
But a small white room with lights upon the wall;
And Senlin, before us, pale, with reddish hair,
Lights his pipe with a meditative stare.

II

Senlin, walking beside us, swings his arms
And turns his head to look at walls and trees.
The wind comes whistling from the shrill stars of winter,
The lights are jewels, the black roots freeze.
'Did I, then, stretch from the bitter earth like these,
Reaching upward with slow and rigid pain

To seek, in another air, myself again?' . . .

(Immense and solitary in a desert of rocks

Behold a bewildered oak

With white clouds screaming through its leafy brain! . . .)

'Or was I the single ant, or tinier thing,

That crept from the rocks of buried time

And dedicated its holy life to climb

From atom to beetling atom, jagged grain to grain,

• Patiently out of the darkness we call sleep

• Into the hollow gigantic world of light

• Thinking the sky to be its destined shell,

• Hoping to fit it well!—'

The city dissolves about us; and its walls

Are mountainous rocks cruelly carved with wind;

Sand streams down their wasting sides, and sand

Mounts upward slowly about them: foot and hand

We crawl and bleed among them. Is this Senlin?

• In the desert of Senlin must we live and die?

• We hear the decay of rocks, the crash of boulders,

• The snarling of sand on sand. 'Senlin!' we cry.

• 'Senlin!' again . . . Our shadows revolve in silence

• Under the soulless brilliance of blue sky . . .

Yet we would say these are no rocks at all,

Nor desert of sand . . . for here by a city wall

White lights jewel the evening, black roots freeze,

And Senlin turns his head to look at trees.

III

It is evening, Senlin says, and in the evening,

By a silent shore, by a far distant sea,

White unicorns come gravely down to the water.

In the lilac dusk they come, they are white and stately,

Stars hang over the purple waveless sea;

A sea on which no sail was ever lifted,

Where a human voice was never heard.

The shadows of vague hills are dark on the water,

The silent stars seem silently to sing.

And gravely come white unicorns down to the water,
 One by one they come and drink their fill;
 And daisies shine like stars on the darkened hill . . .

It is evening, Senlin says, and in the evening
 The leaves on the trees, abandoned by the light,
 Look to the earth, and whisper, and are still.
 The bat with horned wings, tumbling through the darkness,
 Breaks the web, and the spider falls to the ground.
 The starry dewdrop gathers upon the oakleaf,
 Clings to the edge, and falls without a sound.
 Do maidens spread their white palms to the starlight
 And walk three steps to the east and clearly sing?
 Do dewdrops fall like a shower of stars from willows?
 Has the small moon a ghostly ring? . . .
 White skeletons dance on the moonlit grass,
 Singing maidens are buried in deep graves,
 The stars hang over a sea like polished glass . . .
 And solemnly one by one in the darkness there
 Neighing far off on the haunted air
 White unicorns come gravely down to the water . . .

No silver bells are heard. The westering moon
 Lights the pale floors of caverns by the sea.
 Wet weed hangs on the rock. In shimmering pools
 Left on the rocks by the receding sea
 Starfish slowly turn their white and brown
 Or writhe on the naked rocks and drown.
 Do sea-girls haunt these caves—do we hear faint singing?
 Do we hear from under the sea a thin bell ringing?
 Was that a white hand lifted among the bubbles
 And fallen softly back?
 No, these shores and caverns all are silent,
 Dead in the moonlight; only, far above,
 On the smooth contours of these headlands,
 White amid the eternal black,
 One by one in the moonlight there,
 Neighing far off on the haunted air,
 The unicorns come down to the sea.

IV

Senlin, walking before us in the sunlight,
 Bending his long legs in a peculiar way,
 Goes to his work with thoughts of the universe.
 His hands are in his pockets, he smokes his pipe,
 He is happily conscious of roofs and skies;
 And, without turning his head, he turns his eyes
 To regard white horses drawing a small white hearse.

The sky is brilliant between the roofs,
 The windows flash in the yellow sun,
 On the hard pavement ring the hoofs,
 The light wheels softly run.
 Bright particles of sunlight fall,
 Quiver and flash, gyrate and burn,
 Honey-like heat flows down the wall,
 The white spokes dazzle and turn . . .

Senlin walking before us in the sunlight
 Regards the hearse with an introspective eye.
 'Is it my childhood there,' he asks,
 'Sealed in a hearse and hurrying by?'
 He taps with his trowel against a stone;
 The trowel sings with a silver tone.

'Nevertheless, I know this well.
 Bury it deep and toll a bel',
 Bury it under land or sea,
 You cannot bury it save in me.'

It is as if his soul had become a city,
 With noisily peopled streets, and through these streets
 Senlin himself comes driving a small white hearse . . .
 'Senlin!' we cry. He does not turn his head.
 But is that Senlin?—or is this city Senlin,—
 Quietly watching the burial of its dead?
 Dumbly observing the cortège of its dead?

Yet we would say that all this is but madness:
Around a distant corner turns the hearse.
And Senlin walks before us in the sunlight
Happily conscious of his universe.

V

In the hot noon, in an old and savage garden,
The peach-tree grows. Its ugly cruel roots
Rend and rifle the silent earth for moisture.
Above, in the blue, hang warm and golden fruits.
Look, how the cancerous roots crack mould and stone!
Earth, if she had a voice, would wail her pain.
Is she the victim? Or is the tree the victim? . . .
Delicate blossoms opened in the rain,
Black bees flew among them in the sunlight,
And sacked them ruthlessly; and now a bird
Hangs, sharp-eyed, in the leaves, and pecks at the fruit;
And the peach-tree dreams, and does not say a word . . .

. . . Senlin, tapping his trowel against a stone,
Observes this tree he planted: it is his own . . .

'You will think it strange,' says Senlin, 'but this tree
Utters profound things in this garden,
And in its silence speaks to me.
I have sensations, when I stand beneath it,
As if its leaves looked at me, and could see:
And these thin leaves, even in windless air,
Seem to be whispering me a choral music
Insubstantial but debonair.
"Regard," they seem to say,
"Our idiot root, which going its brutal way
Has cracked your garden wall!
Ugly, is it not?
A desecration of this place . . .
And yet, without it, could we exist at all?"
Thus, rustling with importance, they seem to me
To make their apology;
And while they apologize

Ask me a wary question with their eyes.
 Yes, it is true their origin is low—
 Brutish and dull and cruel . . . and it is true
 Their roots have cracked the wall. But do we know
 The leaves less cruel—the root less beautiful?
 Sometimes it seems as if there grew
 In the dull garden of my mind
 A tree like this, which, singing with delicate leaves,
 Yet cracks the walls with cruel roots and blind.
 Sometimes, indeed, it appears to me
 That I myself am such a tree . . .
 . . . And as we hear from Senlin these strange words
 So, slowly, in the sunlight, he becomes this tree:
 And among the pleasant leaves hang sharp-eyed birds
 While cruel roots dig downward secretly.

VI

Rustling among his odds and ends of knowledge
 Suddenly, to his wonder, Senlin finds
 How Cleopatra and Senebtisi
 Were dug by many hands from ancient tombs . . .
 Cloth after scented cloth the sage unwinds:
 Delicious, to see our futile modern sunlight
 Dance like a harlot among those Times and Dooms!

First, the huge pyramid, with rock on rock
 Bloodily piled to heaven; and under this
 A deep-dug cavern, bat-festooned;
 And here in rows on rows, with gods about them,
 Cloudily lustrous, dim, the sacred coffins,
 Silver-starred and crimson-mooned.

What holy secret shall we now uncover?
 Inside the outer coffin is a second,
 Inside the second, smaller, lies a third.
 This one is carved, and like a human body;
 And painted over with fish and bull and bird . . .
 Here are men walking stiffly in procession,
 Blowing horns or lifting spears;

Where do they march to? Where do they come from?
Soft whine of horns is in our ears . . .

Inside the third, a fourth . . . and this the artist,—
A priest, perhaps?—did most to make resemble
The flesh of her who lies within.
The brown eyes widely stare at the bat-hung ceiling.
The hair is black, the mouth is thin.

Princess! Secret of life! We come to praise you . . .
The torch is lowered, this coffin too we open,
And the dark air is sweet with musk and myrrh . . .
Here are the thousand white and scented wrappings,
The gilded face and jewelled eyes of her . . .

And now the body itself, brown, gaunt, and ugly,
And the hollow skull, in which the brains are withered,
Lie bare before us. Princess, is this all? . . .
Something there was we asked that is not answered . . .
Soft bats, in rows, hang on the lusted wall . . .

And all we hear is a sound of ghostly music,
Of brass horns dustily raised and briefly blown,
And a cry of grief, and men in a stiff procession
Marching away and softly gone.

VII

‘And am I then, a pyramid?’ says Senlin,
‘In which are caves and coffins, where lies hidden
Some old and mocking hieroglyph of flesh? . . .
Or am I rather the moonlight, spreading subtly
Above those stones and times a silver mesh? . . .
Or the dark blade of grass that bravely grows
Between two massive boulders of black basalt
Year after year, and blows and fades and blows?’

Senlin, sitting before us in the lamplight,
Laughs and lights his pipe. The yellow flame
Minutely flares in his eyes, minutely dwindles . . .

Does a blade of grass have Senlin for a name? . . .
Yet we would say that we have seen him somewhere,
A tiny spear of green beneath the blue,
Playing his destiny in a sun-warmed crevice
With the gigantic fates of frost and dew.

Does a spider come and spin his gossamer ladder,
Rung by silver rung,
Chaining it fast to Senlin? Its faint shadow
Flung, waveringly, where his is flung?

Does a raindrop dazzle starlike down his length
Trying his futile strength?
A snowflake startle him? The stars defeat him?
Through æons of dusk have birds above him sung?

Time is a wind, says Senlin; time, like music
Blows over us its mournful beauty, passes,
And leaves behind a shadow recollection,—
A helpless gesture of mist above the grasses.

VIII

In the cold blue lucid dusk before the sunrise,
One yellow star sings over a peak of snow,
And melts and vanishes in a light like roses . . .
Through slanting mist black rocks appear and glow.

The clouds flow downward, slowly as grey glaciers,
Or up to pale rose-azure pass.
The blue streams tinkle down from snow to boulders,
From boulders to white grass.

Icicles on the pine tree melt
And softly flash in the sun:
In long straight lines the star-drops fall
One by one.

Is a voice heard while the shadows still are long,
Borne slowly down on the sparkled air?

Is a thin bell heard from the peak of silence?
Is someone among the high snows there? . . .

Where the blue stream flows coldly among the meadows
And mist still clings to rock and tree
Senlin walks alone; and from that twilight
Looks darkly up, to see

The calm unmoving peak of snow-white silence,
The rocks aflame with ice, the rose-blue sky . . .
Ghost-like, a cloud descends from twinkling ledges,
To nod before the dwindling sun and die.
'Something there is,' says Senlin, 'in that mountain,
Something forgotten now, that once I knew . . .'
We walk before a sun-tipped peak in silence,
Our shadows descend before us, long and blue.

II. HIS FUTILE PREOCCUPATIONS

I

'I am a house,' says Senlin, 'locked and darkened,
Sealed from the sun with wall and door and blind.
Summon me loudly and you'll hear slow footsteps
Ring far and faint in the galleries of my mind.
You'll hear soft steps on an old and dusty stairway;
Peer darkly through some corner of a pane
You'll see me with a faint light coming slowly,
Pausing above some balcony of the brain . . .

I am a city . . . In the blue light of evening
Wind wanders among my streets and makes them fair;
I am a desolate room . . . a maiden dances
Lifting her pale hands, tossing her golden hair . . .
She combs her hair, the bare white room is darkened,
She extends herself in me, and I am sleep.
It is my pride that starlight is above me,
I dream amid waves of air, my walls are deep.

I am a door . . . before me rolls the darkness,
Behind me ring clear waves of sound and light.

Stand in the shadowy street outside, and listen—

The crying of violins assails the night . . .

- My walls are deep, but the cries of music pierce them;
- They shake with the sound of drums . . . yet it is strange
- That I should know so little what means this music,
- Hearing it always within me change and change.

Knock on the door,—and you shall have an answer!

Open the heavy walls to set me free,

And blow a horn to call me into the sunlight,—

And startled then what a strange thing you shall see!

Nuns, murderers, and drunkards, saints and sinners,

Lover and dancing girl and sage and clown

Will laugh upon you, and you will find me nowhere . . .

I am a room, a house, a street, a town.

II

It is morning, Senlin says, and in the morning

When the light drips through the shutters like the dew,

- I arise, I face the sunrise,

- And do the things my fathers learned to do.

Stars in the purple dusk above the rooftops

Pale in a saffron mist and seem to die,

And I myself on a swiftly tilting planet

Stand before a glass and tie my tie.

Vine leaves tap my window,

Dew-drops sing to the garden stones,

The robin chirps in the chinaberry tree

Repeating three clear tones.

It is morning. I stand by the mirror

And tie my tie once more.

While waves far off in a pale rose twilight

Crash on a white sand shore.

I stand by a mirror and comb my hair:

How small and white my face!—

The green earth tilts through a sphere of air

And bathes in a flame of space.

There are houses hanging above the stars
 And stars hung under a sea . . .
 And a sun far off in a shell of silence
 Dapples my walls for me . . .

It is morning, Senlin says, and in the morning
 Should I not pause in the light to remember god?
 Upright and firm I stand on a star unstable,
 He is immense and lonely as a cloud.
 I will dedicate this moment before my mirror
 To him alone, for him I will comb my hair.
 Accept these humble offerings, cloud of silence!
 I will think of you as I descend the stair.

Vine leaves tap my window,
 The snail-track shines on the stones,
 Dew-drops flash from the chinaberry tree
 Repeating two clear tones.

It is morning, I awake from a bed of silence,
 Shining I rise from the starless waters of sleep.
 The walls are about me still as in the evening,
 I am the same, and the same name still I keep.

The earth revolves with me, yet makes no motion,
 The stars pale silently in a coral sky.
 In a whistling void I stand before my mirror,
 Unconcerned, and tie my tie.

There are horses neighing on far-off hills
 Tossing their long white manes,
 And mountains flash in the rose-white dusk,
 Their shoulders black with rains . . .
 It is morning. I stand by the mirror
 And surprise my soul once more;
 The blue air rushes above my ceiling,
 There are suns beneath my floor . . .

. . . It is morning, Senlin says, I ascend from darkness
 And depart on the winds of space for I know not where,
 My watch is wound, a key is in my pocket,

- And the sky is darkened as I descend the stair.
There are shadows across the windows, clouds in heaven,
And a god among the stars; and I will go
Thinking of him as I might think of daybreak
- And humming a tune I know . . .

Vine-leaves tap at the window,
Dew-drops sing to the garden stones,
The robin chirps in the chinaberry tree
• Repeating three clear tones.

III

- I walk to my work, says Senlin, along a street
Superbly hung in space.
I lift these mortal stones, and with my trowel
I tap them into place . . .
- But is god, perhaps, a giant who ties his tie
 - Grimacing before a colossal glass of sky?

These stones are heavy, these stones decay,
These stones are wet with rain,
I build them into a wall to-day,
To-morrow they fall again . . .

- Does god arise from a chaos of starless sleep,
• Rise from the dark and stretch his arms and yawn;
• And drowsily look from the window at his garden;
- And rejoice at the dewdrops sparkling on his lawn?
- Does he remember, suddenly, with amazement,
• The yesterday he left in sleep,—his name,—
- Or the glittering street superbly hung in wind
- Along which in the dusk he slowly came? . . .

I devise new patterns for laying stones
And build a stronger wall.
One drop of rain astonishes me
And I let my trowel fall.

The flashing of leaves delights my eyes,
Blue air delights my face;
I will dedicate this stone to god
As I tap it into its place.

IV

That woman—did she try to attract my attention?
Is it true I saw her smile and nod?
• She turned her head and smiled . . . was it for me?
• It is better to think of work or god.

The clouds pile coldly above the houses,
Slow wind revolves in the leaves:
It begins to rain, and the first long drops
Are slantingly blown from eaves.

But it is true she tried to attract my attention!
She pressed a rose to her chin and smiled.
Her hand was white by the richness of her hair,
Her eyes were those of a child.
It is true she looked at me as if she liked me,
And turned away, afraid to look too long! . . .
• She watched me out of the corners of her eyes;
• And, tapping time with fingers, hummed a song . . .

• . . . Nevertheless, I will think of work,
• With a trowel in my hands;
• Or the vague god who blows like clouds
• Above these dripping lands . . .

But . . . is it sure she tried to attract my attention? . . .
She leaned her elbow in a peculiar way
There in the crowded room . . . she touched my hand . . .
She must have known it, and yet,—she let it stay . . .
• Music of flesh! Music of root and sod!
Leaf touching leaf in the wind and the rain! . . .
Impalpable clouds of red ascend,
Red clouds blow over my brain.

Did she await from me some sign of acceptance? . .

I smoothed my hair with a faltering hand.

I started a feeble smile, but the smile was frozen:

Perhaps, I thought, I misunderstand . . .

Is it to be conceived that I could attract her—

This dull and futile flesh attract such fire?

• I,—with a trowel's dulness in hand and brain!—

• Take on some godlike aspect, rouse desire? . . .

• Incredible! . . . delicious! . . . I will wear

• A brighter color of tie, arranged with care;

• I will delight in god as I comb my hair . . .

• And the conquests of my bolder past return

• Like strains of music, weaving some old tune

• Recalled from youth and a happier time.

• I take my sweetheart's arm in the dusk once more;

• Once more we laugh, and hold our breath, and climb

• Up the forbidden stairway, floor by floor,

• Under the flickering lights, along old railings:

• I catch her hand in the dark, we laugh once more,

• I hear the rustle of silk, and follow swiftly,

• And softly at last we close the door . . .

Yes, it is true that woman tried to attract me:

It is true she came out of time for me,

Came from the swirling and savage forests of earth,

The cruel eternity of the sea.

She parted the leaves of waves and rose from the silence

Shining with secrets she did not know.

• Music of dust! Music of web and web!

• And I, bewildered, let her go . . .

I light my pipe. The flame is yellow,

Edged underneath with blue.

• These thoughts are truer of god, perhaps,

• Than thoughts of god are true.

V

It is noontime, Senlin says, and a street piano
 Strikes sharply against the sunshine a harsh chord,
 And the universe is suddenly agitated,
 And pain to my heart goes glittering like a sword.
 Do I imagine it? The dust is shaken,
 The sunlight quivers, the brittle oak-leaves tremble . . .
 The world, disturbed, conceals its agitation;
 And I, too, will dissemble . . .

* Yet it is sorrow has found my heart,
 * Sorrow for beauty, sorrow for death,
 * And pain twirls slowly among the trees
 * And falls like a languid breath.

The street piano revolves its glittering music,
 The sharp notes flash and dazzle and turn.
 * Memory's knives are in this sunlit silence;
 * They ripple and twinkle and lazily burn . . .
 The star on which my shadow falls is frightened,
 It does not move; my trowel taps a stone,
 The sweet note wavers amid derisive music,
 And I, in a horror of sunlight, stand alone.

* Do not recall my weakness, savage music!
 * Let the knives rest! . . .
 Impersonal, harsh, the music revolves and glitters,
 And the notes like poniards pierce my breast.
 The leaves on the bush are shrivelled and shaken and torn,
 The dust is vibrant, the frayed leaves fall;
 And I alone in a streaming silence of sunlight
 Wait among shafts of sorrow, and recall

The face of a friend forgotten, the hands of children,
 Leaves on a morning of frost, the bewildered cry
 Of a girl who walked in the cool green dawn of beauty
 And learned she had to die . . .
 And I remember the shadows of webs on stones,

And the sound of rain on tired grass,
 * And a sorrowful face that looked without illusions
 * At its image in the glass . . .

* Do not recall my childhood, pitiless music!
 The green blades flicker and gleam,
 The red bee bends the clover, deeply humming,
 In the blue sea above me lazily stream
 Cloud upon thin-blown cloud, revolving, scattering,
 The mulberry trees rake heaven and drop their fruit,
 Amazing sunlight sings in the opened vault
 On dust and bones and webs; and I am mute.

It is noon; the bells let fall soft flowers of sound,
 They turn on the air, they shrink in the flare of noon.
 * It is night, and I lie alone, and watch through the window
 * The terrible ice-white emptiness of the moon.
 Small bells, far off, spill jewels of sound like rain,
 A long wind hurries them whirled and far,
 A cloud creeps over the moon, my bed is darkened,
 I hold my breath and watch a star.

Do not disturb my memories, heartless music!
 I stand once more by a vine-dark moonlit wall,
 The sound of my footsteps dies in a void of moonlight,
 And I watch white roses softly fall.
 Is it my heart that falls? Does earth itself
 Drift, a white petal, silently down the sky?
 One bell-note goes to the stars in the blue-white silence,
 Solitary and mournful, a somnolent cry.

VI

- * Death himself in the rain . . . death himself . . .
- * Death in the savage sunlight . . . skeletal death . . .
- * I hear the clack of his feet,
- * Clearly on stones, softly in dust,
- * Speeding among the trees with whistling breath,
- * Whirling the leaves, tossing his hands from waves . . .
- * Listen! the immortal footsteps beat and beat! . . .

- 4 Death himself in the grass, death himself,
- 5 Gyrating invisibly in the sun,
- 6 Scattering grass-blades, whipping the wind,
- 7 Tearing at boughs with malignant laughter . . .
- 8 On the long echoing air I hear him run!

- 9 Death himself in the dusk, gathering lilacs,
- 10 Breaking a white-fleshed bough,
- 11 Strewing the purple spikes on a cobwebbed lawn,
- 12 Dancing, dancing,
- 13 Drunk with excess, the long red sun-rays glancing
- 14 On flourishing arms, skipping with hideous knees,
- 15 Cavorting his grotesque ecstasies . . .
- 16 I do not see him, but I see the lilacs fall,
- 17 I hear the scrape of his hands against the wall,
- 18 The leaves are tossed and tremble where he plunges among them,
- 19 And silence falls, and I hear the sound of his breath,
- 20 Sharp and whistling, the rhythm of death.

It is evening: the lights on a long street balance and sway.
 In the purple ether they swing and silently sing,
 The street is a gossamer swung in space
 And death himself in the wind comes dancing along it,
 And the lights, like raindrops, fall and tremble and swing . . .
 Hurry, spider, and spread your glistening web,
 For death approaches!

- 21 Hurry, rose, and open your heart to the bee,
- 22 For death approaches!
- 23 Maiden, let down your hair for the hands of your lover,
- 24 Comb it with moonlight and wreath it with leaves,
- 25 For death approaches! . . .

Death, colossal in stars, minute in the sand-grain,
 Death himself in the rain, death himself,
 Drawing the rain about him like a garment of jewels . . .
 I hear the sound of his feet
 On the stairs of the wind, in the sun,
 In the forests of the sea . . .
 Listen! the immortal footsteps beat and beat!

VII

It is noontime, Senlin says. The sky is brilliant
Above a green and dreaming hill.
I lay my trowel down. The pool is cloudless,
The grass, the wall, the peach-tree, all are still . . .
It appears to me that I am one with these:
A hill, upon whose back are a wall and trees.

It is noontime: all seems still
Upon this green and flowering hill.

Yet suddenly, out of nowhere in the sky,
A cloud comes whirling and flings
A lazily coiling vortex of shade on the hill . . .
It crosses the hill, and a bird in the peach-tree sings.
'Amazing! . . . Is there a change? . . .
'The hill seems somehow strange.

It is noontime. And in the tree
The leaves are delicately disturbed
Where the bird descends invisibly.
It is noontime. And in the pool
The sky is blue and cool.

Yet suddenly, out of nowhere in the wind,
Something ferociously flings itself at the hill,
Tears with claws at the earth, whirrs amid shadows,
Roars from the grass, rages among the trees,
Lunges and hisses and softly recoils,
Crashing against the green like inaudible seas! . . .
The peach-tree braces itself, the pool is frightened,
The grass blades quiver, the bird is still,
'The wall seems silently struggling against the sunlight,
'Some apprehension stiffens the hill . . .
'And the trees turn rigidly, to face
'Something that circles with slow pace:
'And the blue pool seems to shrink
'From something that slides above its brink . . .
'What struggle is this, ferocious and slow and still?

- What is it that wars in the sunlight on this hill? . . .
- What is it that creeps to dart
- Like a knife-blade at my heart? . . .

It is noontime, Senlin says, and all is tranquil . . .
 The brilliant sky burns over a green-bright earth.
 The peach-tree dreams in the sun, the wall is contented.
 And a bird in the peach-leaves, moving from sun to shadow,
 Phrases again his unremembering mirth,
 His lazily beautiful, foolish, mechanical mirth.

VIII

The pale blue gloom of evening comes
 Among the quiet of forests and walls
 With a mournful and rhythmic sound of drums.
 My heart is disturbed with a sound of myriad throbbing,
 Persuasive and sinister, near and far:
 In the blue evening of my heart
 I hear the thrum of the evening star.

- My work is uncompleted; and yet I hurry,—
- Hearing the whispered pulsing of those drums,—
- To enter the luminous walls and woods of night . . .
- It is the eternal mistress of the world
- Who shakes these drums for my delight . . .
- Listen! the drums of the leaves, the drums of the dust,
- The delicious quivering of this air!
- The eternal mistress is laughing among the stars,
 Yawning in silver amid her hair . . .
- I will leave my work unfinished, and I will go
 With ringing and certain step through the laughter of chaos
 To the one small room in the void I know . . .
- Yesterday it was there,—
- Will I find it to-night once more when I climb the stair? . . .
- Will she remember me—will she greet me,
- And touch my heart with a cool white hand?
- Will music crash like a wave about me
- As I see her rise and stand,
- Solitary and fragrant against the night,
- A single lilac tree in a whirl of light? . . .

The drums of the street run low and far:
 In the blue evening of my heart
 I hear the thrum of the evening star . . .
 And a thousand images recur
 Weaving deliciously in my brain
 A tyrannous melody of her:
 Hands in the sunlight, threads of the rain
 Against her glistening lamplit face,
 Snow on a cold black window-pane,
 And tears in a leafy place . . .
 Stars in a dusk of hair entangled;
 And flesh more delicate than fruit;
 And a voice that searches among my veins
 For a chord to throb and mute . . .

- ♥ My life is uncompleted: and so I hurry,
- ♥ Among the tinkling forests and walls of evening
- ♥ To a certain fragrant room.
 Who is it that dances there, to a beating of drums,
 While stars on a grey sea bud and bloom?
 Who is that lifts her hands in the yellow light
 Turning a dazzle of shoulders against the night?
- ♥ She stands at the top of the stair,
- ♥ With the lamplight on her hair . . .
- ♥ I will walk through the snarling of streams of space,
- ♥ And climb the long steps carved from wind
- ♥ And rise once more towards her face . . .
- ♥ Listen! the drums of the drowsy trees,
- ♥ And the mournful drums of seas!

And out of the evening like a rose
 ♥ The evenings of my past unfold;
 Rain and lilacs, silver and white,
 Evenings of stars, purple and gold . . .
 Music spins from the heart of silence
 And twirls me softly upon the air . . .
 It comes from a far-off luminous room
 And dark star-tangled hair.
 It takes my hand and whispers to me
 The melodious mystery of flesh,
 It draws the web of the moonlight down

And spins for my heart a mesh.
 There are hands, it says, as cool as snow,
 The hands of the Venus of the sea,
 There are waves of sound in a mermaid-cave,—
 Come—then—come with me!
 Softness and whiteness, cool and sweet,
 The flesh of the sea-rose, new and cool,
 The wavering image of her who comes
 At dusk by a blue sea-pool . . .
 Whispers upon the starlit air,
 Whispers of foam-white arm and thigh,
 And a shower of delicate stars blown down
 From the silent sky! . . .
 Music spins from a far-off room . . .
 Do you remember,—it seems to say,—
 The mouth that smiled, beneath your mouth,
 And kissed you . . . yesterday?
 It is your own flesh waits for you,
 Come! you are incomplete! . . .
 The drums of the universe once more
 Morosely beat and beat.

The drum of the white star thrills the sky,
 The drum of the moon beats slow and dull:
 It is death himself who wearily knocks
 A tom-tom on a silvered skull.
 It is the harlot of the world
 Who clashes the leaves like ghostly drums
 And disturbs the solitude of my heart
 As evening comes!

I leave my work once more, and walk
 Along a street that sways in the wind . . .
 Among great trees that grope in space
 I search for a woman's face.

Once more in the evening I let fall
 The thoughts I builded into a wall.
 I leave these stones, and walk once more
 Along infinity's shore.

- I climb the golden-laddered stair;
 - Among the stars in the blue I climb:
 - I ascend the golden-laddered hair
 - Of the harlot-queen of time:
-
- She laughs from a window in the sky,
 - Her white arms downward reach to me! . . .
 - We are the universe that spins
 - In a dim ethereal sea.

IX

- It is evening, Senlin says, and in the evening
 The throbbing of drums has languidly died away.
- The forests and seas are still. We breathe in silence
 - And strive to say the things flesh cannot say.
- The soulless wind falls slowly about the earth
 And finds no rest.
- The lover stares at the stars,—the wakeful lover
 Who finds no peace on his lover's breast.
- The snare of flesh that bound us in is broken;
 - Softly, in sorrow, we draw apart, and see,
 - Far off, the beauty we thought our flesh had captured,—
 - The star flesh longed to be but could not be . . .
 - Clouds blow over us. Rain serenely falls.
 - Rain in the shaken lamplight, rain on the roof.
 - Once more, about us, darken our finite walls . . .
 - Come back! . . . We will laugh once more at the words we
 said . . .
 - We say them slowly again, but the words are dead . . .
 - Come back, beloved! . . . The blue void whirls between.
 - We cry to each other: alone, unknown, unseen.
- We are the grains of sand that run and rustle
 In the wind among old dunes.
- We are the grains of sand who thought ourselves
 Immortal moons.
- You touch my hand, time bears you softly away,—
 An alien star for whom I have no word . . .
- What are the strange and meaningless things you say? .
 I answer you, but am not heard.

It is evening, Senlin says; and the darkness crumbles;
And a dream in ruins falls.

Once more we turn in a silent pain, bewildered,
Among our finite walls:

- The walls we built ourselves with patient hands
- For a god who sealed a question in our flesh:
- Obeying a god's commands.

X

It is moonlight. Alone in the silence
I ascend my stairs once more,
While waves, remote in a pale blue starlight,
Crash on a white sand shore.

It is moonlight. The garden is silent.
I stand in my room alone.
Across my wall, from the far-off moon,
A rain of fire is thrown . . .

There are houses hanging above the stars,
And stars hung under a sea:
And a wind from the long blue vault of time
Waves my curtains for me . . .

- I wait in the dark once more,
Swung between space and space:
• Before my mirror I lift my hands
• And face my remembered face.
• Is it I who stand in a question here,
Asking to know my name? . . .
• It is I, yet I know not whither I go,
• Nor why, nor whence I came.

- It is I, who awoke at dawn
• And arose and descended the stair,
• Conceiving a god in the eye of the sun,—
• In a woman's hands and hair.
• It is I whose flesh is grey with the stones
• I builded into a wall:
• With a mournful melody in my brain
• Of a tune I cannot recall . . .

- There are roses to kiss: and mouths to kiss;
- And the sharp-pained shadow of death.
- I remember a rain-drop on my cheek,—
- A wind like a fragrant breath . . .
- And the star I laugh on tilts through heaven;
- And the heavens are dark and steep . . .
- I will forget these things once more
- In the silence of sleep.

III. HIS CLOUDY DESTINY

I

- Senlin sat before us and we heard him.
 He smoked his pipe before us and we saw him.
 Was he small, with reddish hair,
 Did he light his pipe with a meditative stare
 And a twinkling flame reflected in blue eyes?
 Was he sad and happy and foolish and wise?
 'I am alone,' said Senlin, 'in a forest of leaves
 The single leaf that creeps and greens and falls . . .
 The single blade of grass in a desert of grasses
 That none foresaw and none recalls.
 The single shell that a green wave flings and shatters
 In tiny specks of whiteness on the sands . . .
 How shall you understand me with your hearts,
 Who cannot find me with your hands? . . .'
- The city dissolves about us, and its walls
 Are the sands beside a sea.
 We plunge in a chaos of dunes, white waves before us
 Crash on the weeds tumultuously.
 Gulls wheel over the foam, the clouds blow swiftly,
 The sun is swallowed . . . Has Senlin become a shore?
 Is Senlin a grain of sand beneath our footsteps,
 A speck of shell upon which waves will roar? . . .
 Senlin! we cry . . . Senlin! again . . . no answer,
 Only the crash of sea on a shell-white floor . . .

Yet, we would say, this is no shore at all,
But a small bright room with lamplight on the wall;
And the familiar chair
Where Senlin sat, with the lamplight on his hair.

II

Senlin, alone before us, played a music . . .

Was it himself he played? . . . We sat and listened,
Perplexed and pleased and tired.

'Listen!' he said, 'and you shall learn a secret—

Though it is not the music you desired.

I have not found a music that will praise you! . . .

Out of the heart of silence comes this music,

Quietly sings and quietly dies.

Look! there is one white star above black houses!

And a tiny man who climbs towards far skies!

Where does he walk to? What does he leave behind him?

What was his foolish name?

What did he stop to say, before he left you

As darkly as he came? . . .

"Death?" did it sound like, "love, and god, and laughter,

Sunlight, and work, and pain . . .?"

No—it appears to me that these were symbols

Of things he found no words to explain.

He spoke, but found you could not understand him—

You were alone, and he was alone.

His words were whirled and lost in a raging chaos,

On a laughter of wind his tunes were blown . . .

He sought to touch you, and found he could not reach you,—

Flesh was between; and the walls of time and space.

He sought to understand you, and could not hear you.

He sought to know you, but only saw your face . . .

And so this music, which I play before you,

Does it mean only what it seems to mean?

Or is it a dance of foolish waves in sunlight

Above a desperate depth of things unseen? . . .

Listen! Do you not hear the singing of mermaids

Out of the darkness of this sea? . . .

But no: you cannot hear them; for if you heard them

You would have heard and captured me.
Yet I am here, talking of hands and roses.
Laughter and love and work and god;
As I shall talk of these same things hereafter
In wind and wave and grey-webbed sod.
Walk on a hill and call me: "Senlin! . . . Senlin! . . ."
Will I not answer you as clearly as now?
Listen to rain, and you will hear me speaking.
Look for my heart in the breaking of a bough . . .'

III

Senlin stood before us in the sunlight,
And laughed, and walked away.
Did no one see him leaving the doors of the city,
Looking behind him as if he wished to stay? . . .
Has no one, in the forests of the evening,
Heard the sad horn of Senlin slowly blown?
For somewhere in the worlds-in-worlds around us
He wanders still, unfriended and alone.
Is he the star on which we walk at daybreak,
The light that blinds our eyes?
'Senlin!' we cry. 'Senlin!' again . . . no answer . . .
Only the soulless brilliance of blue skies . . .

Yet we would say, this was no man at all,
But a dream we dreamed and vividly recall;
And we are mad to walk in wind and rain
Hoping to find, somewhere, that dream again.

PUNCH: THE IMMORTAL LIAR

DOCUMENTS IN HIS HISTORY

PART I

PUNCH: THE IMMORTAL LIAR

TWO OLD MEN WHO REMEMBERED PUNCH

I

Do I remember Punch?—Listen—I'll tell you.
I am an old man now, but I remember,
I saw him in the flesh. My, my, what flesh! . . .
I can still see him shut his eyes to sing,—
As he did always when he'd drunk too much! . . .
He was the splendidest fool I ever knew.

His great red nose was bent down like an ogre's,
His mouth was wide, he was half-bald, half-grey,
His legs were bandy. . . . Every woman in town
Had slapped his face,—although, to hear him talk,
You'd think he'd kissed them all! He was a coward,
We kicked him, spat upon him, whipped him, cursed him,
And threw him out of doors. . . . And yet, we liked him.

What lies he told! He had a genius for it.
He killed his wife, hopped upon Sheba's knee,
Walked and talked with devils, raped and murdered . . .
Why did we listen to him? . . . Why did we like him? . . .
Well, I don't know. Say rather that we loved him—
There was a something noble about the man.
Somehow, though small, he cast an enormous shadow.

The night before he died, we carried him home.
He stopped to lean on the churchyard wall a moment,
And stared at the tower clock. "Listen!" he said.

"This heart that beats here,—underneath my hand,—
All of the clocks in the world keep time with it!
Even the stars in the sky, the sun and planets,
Measure their time by me!—I am the centre!"
We thrust him into his house. . . . He fell down laughing . . .

Yes, there was something noble about the man.
He was half mad, no doubt, a sneak, a villain:
And yet, somehow, the world seemed greater for him;
And smaller when he died.

2

So that's your story, is it?—Well, here's mine!
Draw close your coats about you, cross yourselves—
And shut the door! There's a queer wind tonight
Howling as if some ghost were riding on it—
Whose ghost, God knows! And what I've got to tell you
Might crack the earth, and set the devil talking.
See the blue lightning twinkle on that window!
Look at the ashes dancing on that hearth!
Old Nick is riding trees, and at this instant—
Don't look!—may have his red eye at the keyhole.
You say: this Punch had something noble in him.
Noble! Good God! Are words to have no meanings?
Christ was a scoundrel then, and thieves are angels!
Noble! There's rain on the window for your answer,
Old Nick's tattoo of talons. Look outside,
You'll see him spurt off like a ball of fire,
You'll hear a peal of laughter, a clap of thunder,
And smoke will sting your eyes. If there was ever
A viler villain walked this fatal earth
Tell me his name! Mischief he was in flesh,
Mischief he left behind him in his seed,
And ruins rotting where he found his pleasure.
You say he lied. You say his crimes were fables.
But were they? Where is Judy? Dead and festering,
With a gravestone fallen down above her carrion.
Tell me,—what woman was there in this village
He didn't try to kiss? Not one, you know it;

And if he failed, that wasn't his fault, surely.
Who'll put his beer down, now, and swear on the Bible
He ever knew a good deed done by Punch? . . .
Ah! there's rain on the window for your answer.

Now, then,—you'll say, perhaps, I'm superstitious.
But am I? . . . Have I ever looked for signs? . . .
You know me; and you know I'm no old woman
Who squints in a cup of tea-leaves for a portent.
But this I swear, and this I'll swear till doomsday,—
More things go on about us on this earth
Than flesh can know of. Trees have devils in them,
Ghosts go walking out on the waves of the air
And sing in the belfry when the bells are tolling.
What else are owls and bats but evil spirits—
Why do they haunt the churchyard if they're not?
No, I'm not superstitious, more than any
Who use their senses; but I'll tell you this;
The man we knew as Punch was no mere mortal.

Who was he? . . . Wait. I'll tell you. But before,
I've got three questions for you you can't answer!
Who saw Punch come to town? Who was his father?
Where did he come from? . . . Ah! You see; he's human,
(Or so you'd say,) yet no one ever knew
Just who he was, or what his business was.
Presto! and here he stood with a purse of money,
Out of a cloud, you might say,—dropped from heaven.
Again I say,—who saw Punch come to town? . . .
One man! One man alone of all this village
Saw how he came. Or did he? That's the question.
Old Crabbe it was—dead now these fifteen years—
And he it was who told me. . . . It was spring,
And Crabbe, who was still a boy, was in the orchard
Beyond the churchyard—Gardy Gleason's orchard.
He climbed the wall that joins the churchyard wall
And skirts the road, and sat there, legs a-dangling,
To peel a stick. Now then, you know that wall—
You've climbed it after Gardy Gleason's apples;
And you, as well as I, know how the road
Dips down without a curve along the valley

A mile and more. . . . Well, Crabbe was whittling there,
 And looking down the road. And not a soul
 Was in it: he was sure, for he was watching
 To see his father's horse come round the turn.
 Bare as your hand! A warm spring day, no clouds,
 Bees in the apple-blossoms over his head,
 And the sun behind his back. He saw his shadow
 Slanting across the road, and almost reaching
 The other wall; a thin high-shouldered shadow—
 And started, as boys will, to fling his arms,
 To see the shadow wave. . . . And then, of a sudden,
 Without a squeak or sound, another shadow
 Slanted across the road and fell on the wall
 Beyond his own,—and staid there. . . . Arms in the air,
 Young Crabbe went stiff with fright; he turned his head
 And saw in the road, alone before him,—Punch!
 Punch, with a bag and stick across one shoulder—
 And a red grin on his face! . . .

Well—that was queer:

And young Crabbe felt his entrails coiling coldly.
 Where had he come from—slid down out of the air? . . .
 Popped from the ground? . . . But just as he was thinking
 That after all the fellow might have found
 The time to steal upon him,—while he waved
 His arms and shadows there,—just then he noticed
 A thing that made his hair stand up and creep:
 The road, of course, was dusty at that season,—
 And Punch's boots showed not a speck of dust . . .
 This was enough! He slid back over the wall
 And took the short-cut home.

So that's the first count.

The fellow suddenly comes to us from nowhere:
 Breaks from the air as a fish might breach the sea.
 Does flesh do things like that? Not human flesh!
 Only the flesh of angels or of devils,
 Which, having a look of flesh, yet, lighter than air,
 Burns at the touch and blows in a wind like fire;
 Or, seen at dusk, takes on a glow like phosphor . . .
 He comes to us from nowhere; and he tells us
 Of inquisitions, demons, saints, and hangmen.

Who ever heard—in our time—of such things?
 Where was this village that he boasted of—
 Who ever heard him name it?—And these people;
 These constables and Ketches that he murdered
 So humorously, to make so sweet a story;—
 Where are they buried? . . . Ah,—you say,—he lied.
 And so he did. He lied,—when he was drunk,—
 Even of Polly Prim, whom we all knew . . .
 But what does that prove? Nothing—no, sir, nothing!
 For was he always lying?—That's the question! . . .

Consider, then. . . . A mystery comes among us,
 Ugly and vile beyond all human knowledge,
 A walking vice; he lies, seduces, steals,
 Gets roaring drunk, and leads our youth to mischief.
 The village reeks with him. Corruption rules us.
 Lechery shakes our walls, the women snicker,
 The young men brawl. . . . What's this—a sort of angel? . . .
 And here are portents, too! . . . A rain like blood,—
 And the laundry reddens where it dries on the walls;
 Voices are heard; a curious sound of singing
 Thrills from the church at night; and in the morning
 A pig is dead on the altar with its throat cut.
 The same night Janet Crowe has had a vision:
 The door breaks in, the Devil comes in roaring
 With a huge knife in his hands, seizes her hair,
 And drags her screaming. . . . When she wakes she's lying
 Naked upon the floor; the door's wide open;
 Her right hand's paralysed for three days after . . .
 Next Judy's dead, and no one knows just how.
 Punch finds her on the kitchen floor, he says,—
 Her hair spread out, and poison on her lips.
 Well, did she kill herself,—or was she murdered?
 Polly, we know, maintains she killed herself—
 And Punch says she was murdered. Who was right?
 This much we know: we couldn't prove him guilty,
 Nor, for that matter, find a trace of poison;
 A darkness fell about her; and a silence
 Which only owl's or devil's eyes could see through . . .
 "Devils!"—Think hard about that word a minute;
 Conjure these mysteries and freaks before you,

And then recall how strangely and how often
It sounded from a drunken tongue we knew.
Who was it, in the grass on Mory's hill,
Saw Satan walking there with his tail about him
And Faustus at his side? . . . Who was it told us
How he had stoned this devil and his clerk
And sent them capering mistily in the sunlight
Through buttercup and dogrose? . . . Last,—who was it
Mounted the wind and stepped through time and space
To talk with Sheba, Solomon, even Judas,
And all in fact—remark this well—save Christ?
Ah! Now we're coming to it. You begin
To see the dark conclusion I've been hinting!
And now I'll tell you what at last convinced me.
Draw close your coats about you! Cross yourselves!
Outside the window, there, in the rain and lightning,
Hangs some one else who listens to this story.

I had a dream: I dreamed it three times over.
The first time was the night that Punch lay dying;
The second time, the day we found him dead
With his feet against his door, and buried him;
The third time when a year had passed. I dreamed
A devil stood in the pulpit of our church
With a bible in his hands; his face was red,
His horns were glittering gold, his tail, like a serpent,
Was mooned and striped with colours that waned and waxed,
His teeth were sharp as jewels. There he laughed,
As the bible, fluttering open in his hands,
Turned to an infant's head, which down he dashed . . .
Or was it a rose, which turned on the floor to blood? . . .
We leapt in horror, and ran towards him shouting,
We chased him over the pews and down the stairs,
And into the vault; and there, in the darkest corner
We beat him down with sticks, we stoned and kicked him
And trampled on him, until at last, as snakes do,
He quivered,—only a little,—in seeming death.
We thrust his body, then, with the plashy tail
Wound twice about his belly, into a coffin,
And carried it to the graveyard; it was raining;
And some one cried aloud to us in the darkness

“Bury him now in holy ground; for then
His soul will wither and have no power to harm!”
And this we did. We dug a grave in haste
And tumbled the coffin in, and heaped it over
With mud and stones. The rain lashed down upon us;
And some one cried aloud to us in the darkness
“Drive now a cross of wood in the earth above him
And blast his soul.” And so we made a cross
And hammered it into the loosened earth with shovels.
But at the third stroke suddenly came a cry,
The wet earth flashed and opened, the coffin burst,
The devil leapt before us, thumbed his nose,
And laughing, with a low sound like boulders falling
Or far-off thunder, vanished into the rain.
We looked at the grave, and saw the earth heal over
Before our very eyes . . . roots, grass, and all. . . .

Three times I dreamed this dream;—and from the third,
Waking in terror, on such a night as this
With large rain plashing on the walls and windows
And the chimney gulping wind, I suddenly saw
The meaning of my dream; I pulled my clothes on
And took my spade and lantern and went out
Into the darkness. Rain and clouds like smoke
Flew past the lantern; dark were all the houses;
The broken weather-vane on the church was clinking,
The churchyard gate groaned loudly as it opened,
And the oak-tree buzzed in the wind. I raised the lantern,
And saw the tall white pyramid of marble
That’s next to Punch’s grave. By this I set
The lantern down on the grass; and took my spade
And dug. The wet earth cut like cheese. In no time
I’d gone six feet. I held the lantern up
And looked down into the hole—and there was nothing.
Well, then—I thought perhaps I’d been mistaken—:
Dug to one side. I took the spade again
And dug two feet to the right, two feet to the left,—
Then lengthened it. And what I found was—nothing!
No trace!—no trace of coffin or of bones!
Only the rainy roots . . . I filled the grave
And went back home: and lay awake all night

Thinking about it. When the morning came,—
 I don't know what it was got into my head,—
 I sneaked back into the churchyard just for luck—
 To see if I'd got the sods on straight, and rake
 The dirt away. And what do you think I saw?
 That grave was just as if I'd never dug there!
 Healed over—like the grave I saw in the dream! . . .

Now then, you, over there! you say this Punch
 Had something noble in him; tell me, will you—
 What kind of a man is this, who comes from nowhere,
 Runs through the town like fire, and when he's buried
 Skips from the grave, and takes his coffin with him!
 Angel or devil, maybe, but no mortal—
 Nor angel, either! And I make no riddles.
 Believe or not, that's what I saw. You've only
 To take a spade, and dig, to prove me wrong. . . .

And it's no sacrilege to dig for devils.

WHAT PUNCH TOLD THEM

Punch in a beer-house, drinking beer,
 Booms with his voice so that all may hear,
 Bangs on the table with a red-haired fist,
 Writhes in his chair with a hump-backed twist,
 Leers at his huge nose, in the glass,
 And then proclaims, in a voice of brass:
 Let all who would prosper and be free
 Mark my words and listen to me!
 Call me a hunchback? call me a clown?
 I turned the universe upside down!
 And where is the law or love or chain
 That can't be broken by nerve or brain?

Of all my troubles my wife was first!
 If once I loved her, at last I cursed!
 I stole her out of her father's house,
 Kissed her, made her my lawful spouse,—
 And loved her, too, for a certain season . . .

And where's the woman who loves in reason?
She dogged me up; she dogged me down;
She tracked my footsteps through the town;
Kissed me, clung to me; asked for more;
'Punch, do you love me?'—till I swore
I'd break her neck! I'd fling her away!
Or sail to a foreign land and stay . . .
You've all got wives—now listen to me,
Learn how a man can go scot free!
Did I slit her gorge with a carving-knife—
Offer the hangman's noose my life?
Not Punch!—There are ways and ways to kill,—
Some take courage and some take skill . . .
Poor Judy's dead—and the constables think
She fell downstairs—but here, I wink!
Yes, sirs, there's ways and ways of dying,
Some with wailing and some with crying;
But some of us die in the dead of night
With never a sound in the candlelight.
They stretched her out in a coffin small,
They hid the coffin under a pall,
And the mourners came all dressed in black,
Shouldered it, each with bending back,
And carried it out. . . . I sat apart
And wiped my eyes and broke my heart—
Oh, yes! and each 'Poor Punch!' he said
As he saw me weep and bow my head.

Well, sirs, it may seem strange to you
But I was sad, for a day or two—
I thought of Judy and all she'd been,
How young she was, and then my sin
Came in a nightmare to my brain
And shook my hand with a palsy pain.
Superstition be damned! said I—
There's no use moping—we all must die—
And what does it matter how it's done?
Weep in roses, or hang in fun!
And so it happened, and not long after,
Strutting around with a crooked laughter,
I met this girl named Polly Prim,

Dark and devilish, red-lipped, slim,
A virgin harlot, the fame of the place,
Because no man had kissed her face.
Now I'm not handsome, as you can see,
But I've a power with girls in me—
I take no credit, it's something given,
Sent to the womb by hell or heaven—
A trick, a knack, a stab of the eye,
A twist of the lip, malicious, sly,
Soft in persuasion, bold in the act—
No nut's so hard that it can't be cracked!
You wouldn't think, with a nose like mine,
Purple and gorgeous with too much wine,
And a bony hump like a pedlar's pack
Pushing the coat up off my back,
You wouldn't think that a man like this,
Short of murder, could steal a kiss . . .
And yet I swear, by the devil's dame,
There's many a girl I've called by name,
And when I called, by gad, she came!

This Polly, well, she was like them all—
Ripe red fruit and ready to fall;
Love her—me? God bless you, no!
But nevertheless I told her so—
I smiled to her—whispered, in the street,
Two words—enough! we arranged to meet
At the willow tree by the churchyard wall
As soon as the proper dark should fall.
Well, I was late—I kept her waiting—
Nothing better than a bit of baiting—
And she was vexed and started to go.
'Polly,' said I, 'I love you so!
You won't desert me,—now we've started,—
And leave your poor Punch broken-hearted? . . .
Now look! By Judy's green grave there
There's none so pretty as you, I swear!'—
At this she trembled and clung to me
And rose tip-toe by the wall, to see
Where Judy's grave was . . . Meanwhile I
Pretended, furtive, to wipe my eye.

'Poor Punch!' she sighed, 'your Judy's dead . . .
Did you love her—much?' I shook my head.
'Not half as much as you,' I said . . .
'Why do you cry, then?' 'Because I'm lonely.
Polly I love you, love you only.'
At this she frowned. 'No doubt,' said she,
'You said to her what you say to me.'
She took two steps toward the town,—
I caught her backward by her gown;
And what do you think I told her then?
Oh, there's no limit to the wit of men!
I told her straight if she'd be brave,
I'd prove my love by Judy's grave.
She looked at me with a sudden scare.
'Come to the grave—I'll kiss you there!'

The night was thick. No moon there was.
The wind made whickerings in the grass.
The willows tapped at the churchyard wall
And we saw, like ghosts, the dead leaves fall.
'What's that?' said Polly. 'Dead leaves!' said I.
Close to our heads a bat whizzed by.
She clung to my arm, her hand was weak,
She opened her lips but could not speak.
I stooped and caught her under the knees
And lifted her up, as light as you please,
Over the wall; but just as I climbed
To the cold stone top the church clock chimed,
Then boomed the hour with a thunder-sound:
And a gravestone keeled with a clap to the ground . . .
Well, I'm not easily scared, but that,
Take my word for it, knocked me flat!
I've danced at murders, laughed at duels—
But at this my sweat rolled off in jewels!
Polly looked up at the starless sky
And covered her face and began to cry;
She leaned against me and clung and trembled;
But I, though scared, of course dissembled,—
I took her arm, and led her then
Over the weed-wet tombs of men.
Once, we stumbled upon a spade—

Thrust in the earth by a vault new-made;
Once, in the dark, I heard her moan
As she touched with her hand a dew-cold stone.
But we came to Judy's grave, and there
I kissed her eyelids, loosed her hair,
Swore there was no such thing as sin,—
And she, being frightened, soon gave in.
You know I'm honest; I won't pretend
That I wasn't scared, nor recommend,—
At least not wholly, to all,—such fashion
For most enjoying an evening's passion.
For more than once, at the wail in the trees,
The heart in my body seemed to freeze;
And I half expected,—bless my eyes!—
To see a ghost from the cold grass rise.

So much for Polly. I here pass over
The days that followed,—days of clover!
But all things end, and the trouble came
When Polly died,—with me to blame.
There lived a constable in that town,
An insolent bully, a red-necked clown,
With small pig's eyes and stupid face,
A fool, the laughing-stock of the place.
He hated me, as I did him,
Because he loved this Polly Prim . . .
Why does the good Lord make such fellows?
He rolled his head and blew like a bellows
Whenever, as often, he chanced to see,
On a clear evening, Polly and me
Walking together along the lane:
Upon my honour, it gave him pain! . . .
And once, one evening, as we lay
With much to do and little to say
In deep grass by the churchyard wall,—
We suddenly heard a pebble fall;
And there he crept in the darkness, groping
From stone to stone with loud steps, hoping
To catch us out . . . How still we kept!
This way and that in the dark he stopt,
Heavily breathing, bending, peering;

And when at last he was out of hearing,
Lord how we laughed; and how like flame
Our kisses after that fright became!—
Well, on the night that Polly died,
I sat in the inn, alone. Outside
The rain came down in glassy sheets,
I heard it sing and seethe in the streets,
Green lightning through the windows flashed,
Thunder along the treetops crashed,
A shrill wind whistled; and once it seemed
I heard through the wind a voice that screamed . . .
I knew right well that Pol was dying,
I stopped my ears, but still that crying
Rang like a nightmare through my brain.
Then all at once, through the window-pane,
I saw this constable's white face stare,
Stare and vanish. I left my chair,
My flesh turned cold, for I knew well
The news the constable came to tell:
I knew, as well as that light is light,
Murder had come to town that night.
The door flew open: in he came,
With his mouth like wax and his eyes like flame.
'Good evening, officer,' then said I:
'Is it raining still?'—There was no reply,—
For a breath or two; and then he said
'I suppose you know your whore is dead?'—
He stared at me: I stared at him . . .
'I suppose you allude to—Polly Prim?'
'Allude? You know damned well I do.'
'A whore is a whore. What's that to you?'
'You know damned well what it is to me—
And now you'll settle . . .' A knife flashed free,
Flashed in an arc, I ducked, he lunged,
Down to the floor like an ox he plunged
With me on top: I caught his wrist,
Snapped it sharp with a sudden twist,
His fingers loosened, the knife fell out,
I caught the haft up, turned about,
And struck him twice. He gave one moan,
Clutched once,—and then lay still as stone.

Now, this was folly. . . . I'm free to admit
For once—h'm—anger outran my wit.
Murder will out! I was straightway tried
By a jealous judge, and would have died
Had not my cunning returned to me,
At the gallows foot, and set me free.
There was a hangman there, poor wretch,
A morbid soul by the name of Ketch—
Jack Ketch; a corpse with a slow green eye
That only lit when he saw men die.
No sooner was I condemned, than he
Conceived a peculiar joy in me:
Watched me, talked to me; to and fro
Before my window he would go,—
Forever touching, as he spoke,
Hand to gullet, his little joke!
Now, when the day for the hanging fell,
He came to the court outside my cell,
And set up, under my very eyes,
The gallows! . . . Well, sirs, being wise,
And having pretended, many days,
To be a fool, I began to praise . . .
'Oh, what a pretty tree!' said I,
And clapped my hands. He rolled one eye
With a dubious tilt toward me then
And grinned, and slouched away again.
Back he came, in a whisper's time,
With rope and ladder, and started to climb
To the gallows-top. At this I ran
To the small cell-window, and began
To cry 'Stop, thief!—There's a thief out here!
Robbing the fruit-tree!'—shrill and clear
I sang this out: Jack Ketch spun round
And stared at me with never a sound . . .
He looked at me with a pitying look,
Then once or twice his head he shook,
Tapped his forehead, tied up his noose,
Leaving it swinging large and loose,
Climbed down, and sauntered off once more . . .
This time, when he came back, he bore,
(He and the sheriff, on their heads,)

A coffin, all lapped round with leads . . .
'Aha!' I cried, with a knowing air;
'The thieves have fetched a basket there!—
Down they dropped it upon the stones—
Thump! and a shudder thrilled my bones.

Ketch came to me. 'Now, Punch, step out!'
'Oh, no!' cried I: 'What's this about?'
'Come out, sir, and be hanged!' said he,—
'A pretty fruit for a pretty tree!—
'Hanged on a tree—what's that?' said I.
'Hanged by the neck until you die!'
At this I wept and beat the stones,
A mortal terror froze my bones;
I cried aloud as I was led
To the gallows foot, already dead . . .
Jack Ketch began to shine with glee.
—'Put up your pretty head!' said he—
'Inside the noose!'—I began to quake,
The rope came dangling like a snake,
I touched it, shivered, touched again,
And took it in my hands, and then,—
Once more pretending lack of wit,—
Thrust up my head—outside of it . . .
'Oh, no!' said Ketch—'inside, inside!'
'Inside of what?'—Again I tried,
And failed again. At this he swore.
'Now, Punch, watch me, and try once more!'
He held the noose above his crown
And then with his two hands dropped it down,—
And quick as a wink I hauled him high,
Hauled him dangling against the sky,
Knocked down the sheriff, turned and ran,
Once more a free and happy man!

Oh, Lord, oh, Lord, what things I've done!
What tricks have played, what devil's fun!
With many a death my hands are red;
Many a heart for me has bled;
Many a tear has fallen for me
From woman's golden praying-tree!

I will not say I've not at times
Fled from the darkness of my crimes:
Sometimes with sin and sickness faint,
On my poor knees, before some saint,
I've wept the blackness of my heart
And vowed a better life to start . . .
Yet I confess each saint was human,
Some not too proud or holy woman,—
And not too proud for earthly blisses,
Laughter, and moonlight sport, and kisses!—
What girls have held their hands to me!
What mouths to touch, what eyes to see!
Yet something's in me, something strange,
That drives me on to seek for change;
I love for a little and not for long—
And walk my ways then with a song.
Some hold—and I will not deny—
It's not of a mortal birth am I:
I wailed not from a woman's womb,
Nor am I destined for the tomb . . .
Some hold, who've known the things I've done,
I am the devil's only son . . .
But this I doubt . . . For once I saw
Old Nick himself with tail and claw,
On a green hillside in the dusk
Where the wild roses were in musk.
With Doctor Faustus by him there,—
Bearing a black book, pale as care,—
He paced the grass; his eyes were coal;
He sought to snare my immortal soul.

It was, I say, as evening fell.
The sky was green. A silver bell
Sang in the vale, and all fell still
As Satan smoked across that hill.
I lay in the grass and sucked a straw
And schemed how I might thwart the law,
When suddenly, lifting up my eyes,
I saw him red against the skies.
Lord, what a start it gave to me!
'Good evening, Mr. Punch!' said he . . .

And at those words, like whips of flame,
A dark cloud on that hillside came,
The shapes of rocks began to change,
The trees seemed sinister and strange,
They stirred upon their stems, and eyes
Peered out from under leaves, and cries
Flew bodiless upon that air
In angry jargon everywhere;
And though I looked a long while down
I saw no valley, saw no town.
Old Nick himself was nowhere then,
Although I heard his voice again
Out of the dark in swollen tones
Like fall of subterranean stones:
'Consider well what you shall see
And make your bargain here with me!—
Then Faustus, with a hand that shook,
Turned the great pages of his book,
As if he turned the stars; and first
A flood of light around me burst;
And in a valley by a sea
Bound by invisible veins to me
All in the twinkling of an eye
A town went glistening towards the sky,
With walls and towers and clustered trees
And swarms of men there thick as bees . . .
Then Faustus, tremulous with age,
Turned like a sheaf of sky that page,—
Valley and sea were rolled away . . .
I saw myself, at the end of day,
Climb up a peaked and verdant hill
Beside the twinklings of a rill;
And there a rock I saw; and there
A voice was heard upon that air
Saying, 'Smite once!' and in my hand
There grew, as out of the air, a wand,
And once I smote. And straight there came
Out of the rock a crimson flame,
And out of the flame, naked and fair,
Venus herself, with golden hair.
Upon white daisies there she stepped

And first she shivered, and then she wept,
And then through her hair she smiled at me,
And sidelong came; but suddenly
Like time itself that luminous page
Flashed, and I saw that archimage
Spread out his ancient hands, and look
Grimacing upward from his book.
'You see now, Mr. Punch,' he said,
'What power we hold. Even the dead
Rise upward through the trammelled grass
If we command. All comes to pass,
As we desire!'—'Then let me see,'
Said I, 'if such a thing can be!'—
He turned his huge page once again . . .
And now I saw a level plain
Far as the eye could see, and there
Were graves and tombstones everywhere.
And all those graves and tombs were still,
Motionless as the dead, until
There rose, as out of the earth, a cry
Wavering slowly to the sky;
And suddenly then, but without sound,
Those stones fell softly to the ground,
Millions of tombs divulged their dead . . .
With clapping arm and pallid head
Against a sky of sunset flame
Out of the trammelled grass they came,
Stirred like a forest in the wind,
Flourished their bones, till, somehow thinned,
They seemed to blow along that sky
Like hosts of withered leaves, that fly
Before a stream of air; and then
Dwindled, fell down, lay still again . . .
Then Faustus said: 'The time has come:
Sign here your name, set here your thumb!
All power will Satan give to you
If, dying, you will repay the due.'
'My soul, you mean?'—'I mean your soul!'
'Then may my heart turn black as coal
Before I serve, eternally,
Any such tyrant fiend as he!'—

At this a roiling cloud of smoke
Burst from the grass, and Satan spoke
And burned before me on that hill.
'Surrender now,' he cried, 'your will!'
I reached to earth, and seized a stone,
And flung it straight; and, all alone,
Saw how he melted in that air
With ancient Faustus by him there;
Before it struck I saw him pass;
The stone fell softly to the grass . . .
And there in the grass I sucked a straw
And schemed how I might thwart the law.

What is it, in a woman's skin,
So surely drives a man to sin?
What is it, in a woman's eyes,
No sooner laughed in than it dies? . . .
The loveliest lady in that town
Was she, who wore a green silk gown,
The baker's wife, a haughty dame,—
And it was sweet to bring her shame!
The first time, when I smiled at her,
She curled her lip and did not stir . . .
The second time, she gleamed at me
Through narrowed eyes, amusedly.
The third time—she went quickly by,
But there was laughter in her eye.
I turned to look and she turned too—
And she was surely mine I knew.
The fourth, I met her by a stream
Reading a book, but half in dream:
It was an afternoon in spring—
We might have heard the blackbird sing.
She talked uneasily, laughed at me,
Picked up her book, but let me see
She more than liked to have me there:
And dropped her book and primped her hair.
I leaned and caught one fingertip,
Playfully squeezed it, let it slip
Into the grass again . . . We lay
And breathed and smiled, no word to say.

The fifth—I met her late at night.
Her eyes were dark in lantern-light.
I caught her arm and pressed it twice
And felt her hand as cold as ice . . .
‘Pauline, come out to walk with me!’
She shook her head. ‘Oh, no!’ said she—
Her opened lips were grey with pain,
Backward and forward along the lane
She looked, afraid lest we be seen.
‘Oh, no!’ said she—but did she mean
No with her voice, yes with her heart? . . .
I took her hand as if to start
And suddenly she began to cry,—
Yet came with me . . . ‘Pauline,’ said I,
‘Lift up your mouth!’ Once more, at this,
She shook her head . . . yet took my kiss,
Shut both her eyes, clung hard to me,
And closer leaned with breast and knee . . .
Above black trees the moon swam high
And small white clouds were in the sky;
The lilac-heads were sweet; we crept
Past houses where the good folk slept
Into a garden; a silver light
Flared through the trees, and dimly bright
Were pool and grass and garden walk;
And there we sat to kiss and talk;
And there, beneath that poplar tree,
She gave her trembling heart to me . . .
The sixth, by all odds, was the best—
By this her conscience was at rest;
She smiled at me as if to say
‘Do not persuade,—but have your way.’
It was a sun-stilled afternoon,
The brook flashed fire. A sliver of moon
Seemed, like an icy ghost, to melt
In warm blue sky . . . Her heart I felt
Thumping beneath my palm. We stayed
A sweet while there in the poplar shade:
She told her secrets, every one,
And of her husband we made fun.
The seventh—she began to cling,—

And fiddled with her wedding ring . . .
'O! we were monstrous sinners both,
And we should part!' But she was loth
To come to this; so clung to me
Almost, perhaps, too tenderly . . .
The eighth and ninth—my joy was mixed.
Our kisses over, straight she fixed
Her blue eyes on my heart, to say,
Since I had led her so astray,
And made her loathe her husband—why,
If I should leave her she would die!
At this, you'll easily conceive,
My one wish was, of course, to leave . . .
And though I kissed her, stroked her, smiled,
Tickled her chin, and called her 'child,'
Sidelong she peered askance at me,
Her eyes grew dark,—and she could see
Plainly as pebbles in the brook
The secret thoughts beneath my look.
'What are you thinking, girl?' I said,—
Sharply she turned away her head,
Compressed her lips, was still a space
Put up one hand against her face,—
And then in a queer tone, forced and low,
Said, 'Nothing—only, it's time to go.'
And then cold fury rose in me
And we walked homeward silently.

Well, sirs, it was that very night,
Brooding alone by candlelight,
My queerest of all adventures came . . .
I sat and sulked. My thoughts, like flame,
Licked up my memories of Pauline,
Calling her vulgar, plain, obscene,
Coarse-fleshed, a dull and nagging thing,
Conquered only to crawl and cling.
Why do they change? . . . Why lags desire? . . .
Resentment in me like a fire
Roared on the tinsel of those days,
Consumed them all. I walked those ways
By every leaf and stone again,

And every leaf was a leaf of pain,
And every stone lay cold in me
Or fell through depths of agony.
Was there in all this wide world never
One woman I might love for ever?
Of if that miracle could not be,
One woman who might tire of me
Before I tired, and fling me by:
One woman lustrous as the sky,
Girdled with stars, set round with light,
Whose heart was music, whose eyes were night?
Who moved like a sea wave in the wind;
Transfiguring all things when she sinned?
This was absurd—I laughed at this!
What woman would dare to refuse my kiss?
What queen, indeed, could tire of me?—
And yet, if such a queen might be . . .
Beautiful, haughty, perilous, wise . . .
What rarer sport, what nobler prize?
At this I must have slept; for when
My puzzled eyes unclosed again
The room seemed darker,—large, and strange;
Even as I looked, it seemed to change;
And as I marvelled, straight I heard
Close to my ears one whispered word—
'Sheba!'—said once. And then I saw
Old Nick himself with tail and claw
Come back again. Beside me there
He marvellously emerged from air
First horns and head, then tail and limb,
Upward, as one might softly swim
From ocean's depths . . . One gleaming hand,
Even before I saw him stand,
Still bodiless, he stretched to me . . .
'So, Punch, you've called my name,' said he,—
'And here I am!'—His dark mouth grinned.
Within those walls was a tempest wind.
The candle guttered. His glowing face
Filled with a ghostly shine that place.
'Listen!' said he . . . and as he spoke
Those walls, no solider than smoke,

Seemed slowly streaming on dark air . . .
'There is one woman wise and fair,
More marvellous than her you dream.
This is my bargain—this my scheme.
You shall be borne through time and space
To feed your soul upon this face:
If you can win her you are free;
But if you fail,—you come to me!'—
My heart beat loudly. 'Done!' said I . . .
From all the elements rose a cry,
Water and fire and wind and earth
Joined in a frenzied scream of mirth.
Punch or the Devil—they should see
Which was the better man to be! . . .

All in the twinkling of his eye
I crossed blue seas of whistling sky.
The clamor died behind me. Soon
By Sheba's gate, under a moon,—
Against which palm-trees black as jet
Fringed in a giant silhouette,—
Along a path of silver sand
I walked, with stars on either hand.
Beneath the palm-trees fountains splattered,
Luminous fishes flashed and scattered,
Leaving behind them streaks of fire
And bubbles of light. . . . The moon pushed higher,
And through black branches, quick as flame,
Luminous parrots went and came,
And fiery feathers drifted down . . .
Lord, what a place for me, a clown!
I skipped along that path; and there
Flew marvellous music on that air,—
Slow horns and cymbals, and the sound
Of many dancers whirling round.
And then my heart stood still in me:
By the flaming doorway I could see,
Two giants, black as stone, and tall
As pine trees, one by either wall.
Like fiery moons their eyes they rolled;
They roared at me; my brain went cold;

But in between them, nothing daunted,
I capered up those stairs, and flaunted,
Wagging the hump upon my back,
Into the court . . . Lord, what a pack
Of men and women jostled there!
Sheba sat in a golden chair
Set high upon a glittering throne
Of jewelled and silvered ivory-bone.
A fan of peacocks' feathers waved
Before her eyes. The floor was paved
With golden moons and stars of blue;
Vermilion birds about her flew;
And out of the air dissolving sweet
Fell music with persuasive beat.
And then I saw how one by one
Great mages filed before that throne,—
Upon their knees went humbly down
Scholar and prince with book and crown;
To all she smiled, denied them all,
Vainly before her did they fall.
The Duke of Lorraine trembled there;
King Solomon, too, with snow-white hair;
Herod the Great hung down his head,
And Virgil, pallid as the dead;
Judas Iscariot, dark of eye,
Pulled at his chin and shuffled by . . .
And last of all that host came I!—
Lord, how I shook! She smiled at me . . .
And in her eyes as in a sea
Of fire and darkness I went down:
In froth of moonlight seemed to drown:
Whirled in a wave of music, spun
In ravelling fiery threads of sun!
Where was I? . . . Was I shivering there? . . .
A roar of laughter smote that air,
The mages shook their sides with glee,
Queens and madmen laughed at me.
Solomon laid his crown aside
And clapped his hands: and Judas cried;
And Heliogabalus sobbed aloud . . .
White anger froze my veins. I bowed

Coldly, to all—and all fell still,
Except one laugh that trailed out shrill
Then died away. 'Great queen!' I said—
And paused. She leaned her golden head,
With one white hand beside her ear:
'Louder!' she said—'I cannot hear!'—
And slowly smiled—and as she smiled
Smaller and foolisher than a child
I seemed. I cleared my voice, and then—
'Great queen!' began,—and once again
Forward she leaned and smiled at me,
In grave and sweet perplexity,
And raised one small hand, crystal-clear,
Once more to touch her jewelled ear.
And then, behind my back, I heard
Laughter subdued, a tittered word,
A stir of mirth . . . I turned and glared,—
Saw solemn faces ill prepared;
Saw twisting mouth and shifting eye.
So Sheba's deafness was a lie!
And quick as a wink I turned, I climbed
Those ivory steps. Clear laughter chimed,
Confusion rose. Beside her throne
I leaned, I roared in a tempest tone
'Sheba, my name is Punch! I stand
With power of darkness in my hand,—
Power to shake your kingdom down,
To crack your heart and break your crown!
And then as I stood quaking there,
Feeding upon her eyes, her hair,
Amazing drunkenness waved in me:
I gallantly hopped upon her knee,
I kissed her mouth! and straight arose
A clamour of cries, and silence froze,
And Sheba, quivering backward, weak,
Tried once, and twice, and thrice, to speak;
And flushed; and stared; and laughed; and then—
Put up her mouth to kiss again! . . .

At once sweet music thrilled the air!
Heliogabalus tore his hair!

Solomon raged and broke his crown,
Vermilion birds flew singing down,
Horns and cymbals stormed at the wall
And a dancing madness took them all.
All night they danced . . . and all night through
Vermilion parrots clanged and flew . . .
The walls were shaken with song and glee
While Sheba lay and smiled at me.
And through her eyes I went and came
Now like an ice-thing, now like flame,
A thousand times . . . Before us waved
A peacock fan . . . the floor was paved
With golden moons and stars of blue . . .
And dancers danced there, all night through.
And day by day and night by night
I dwelt there in amazed delight,
King of that golden mountain-land
With slaves to bless my least command.
Take this! fetch that! . . . An old guitar,
The blue dust falling from a star,
Pearls for Sheba or wine for me,
Or coral bleeding from the sea,—
No matter what; for quick as a wink
It came, before I'd time to think.
How Sheba smiled! and how she laughed!
And oh, what cups of wine she quaffed,
And how we danced and how we sang,
And how that glittering palace rang
With music under the rosy moon
Of horn and cymbal and bassoon!
Heliogabalus was my slave,
And Judas nightly from his grave
Rose with a sheet about his loins
To dance before us for copper coins,
Weeping, weeping for his sins
To a cheerful tune from violins . . .
Mermaids came with rainbow fins,
Sea-weed-bearded kings of the sea
Showered rich tribute there for me,—
Dead men's treasure of gold and stones
Was swept away before our thrones.

And once—one evening—tired of this,
Yes, tired for once of Sheba's kiss,
Tired of purple and gold, and cries
Of parakeets with crimson eyes,
Musicians beating perpetual drums
And diamonds brushed away like crumbs,
Tired of this, with joy I listened
To a mermaid's voice; her blue eyes glistened,
Cold as the sea were her eyes, and deep,
And walking like one who walks in sleep
I went with her, I followed her down
Great stairs of stone to a royal town
With towers of sea-shell filigree
By glow-worms lit in the gloom of the sea;
And amber walls, and streets of sand . . .
The blue-eyed mermaid took my hand:
Silver dolphins with eyes of flame
Snoring fountains about us came,
Crabs whose backs were pearl-encrusted
And ancient turtles diamond-dusted;
All the dark kingdom came to rout us
And oh! what a dance was danced about us! . . .
Until, at the break of the blue sea-day,
Up coral stairs I hurried away,
Once more to Sheba, the scarlet queen,
Who danced with bells and a tambourine,
Who poured black wine, and sang to me
Till I forgot that queen of the sea. . . .

Well, sirs, all things will come to an end,—
Old Nick, you know, is no man's friend . . .
How long I stayed, I don't know now—;
But back I came,—I don't know how,—
To go my daily rounds again
With red birds darting through my brain . . .
Yes, sirs, there's many a thing I've done—
I've had my fling, I've had my fun:
No man or devil has bested me,—
Clap me in jail, I soon go free!
Even the inquisition came

And marked a cross against my name,
And locked me howling into a prison
Because I denied their Christ had risen!
But did I stay there? . . . Not a bit.
There's always a way for nerve and wit!
A man's wit is a golden key
To open the door and set him free . . .
And Death—how many times I've fought him!—
How many lessons I have taught him!
The first time—I was in my bed:
Naked I fought him, cracked his head,
And drove him, moaning, into the street . . .
Death! Do you think he's hard to beat?
Why once, when I was young and strong,
I chased the varlet all day long,—
Up hill and down, by vale and shore,
And into the sea! It made me roar
To see those lean shanks rise and fall,
To hear him rattle across a wall,—
To hear him crying aloud for breath . . .
Even old Nick is worse than Death! . . .
And want and weariness—well, these too
Will somewhere lie in wait for you;
And sickness like a black dog comes
To whine at the table and beg for crumbs . . .
Yet here you see me—a mortal man:
And what I've conquered,—all men can!

. . . A mortal man . . . Though I'll not say
That some time, after the end of day,
You might not see me, a giant size,
Hurling a shadow against the skies . . .
Blotting the stars . . . at one step taking
A hill or a town . . . the whole earth shaking . . .
And I'll not say that the time must come
When Death will find me, and leave me dumb!

WHAT POLLY ONCE CONFESSED

Since you insist, you fool, why then, I'll tell you . . .
 Love Punch? Good Lord! I hope I'm not so silly!
 Red-nosed, with hands like hams, humpbacked and bandy,—
 And small green rheumy eyes! I'd sooner love
 The wildman that they showed us in the circus!
 Him with the ring in his nose, and the leaves in his hair,
 And the long arms like a gorilla's always dragging!
 Love him! . . . Don't make me laugh. I'll crack the mirror.
 But since you insist (and I can see you're hungry
 As all men are, sooner or later, in love,
 To root among my muddy secrets, snuffling
 Above them with a leering satisfaction)
 Why then, I'll tell you. Hate me if you want to.
 The whole thing comes to one word—jealousy! . . .
 And I won't say that as I look back on it,
 And all that came from it of lies and hatred,
 I don't, sometimes, feel fifty kinds of fool . . .
 You've heard of jealousy? How wise you are!
 Well, then, you know how blind and cruel it is,
 How like a cramp it shuts about the heart
 And turns the blood to poison, and so sends it
 Creeping into the brain for schemes of torture.
 Judy and I were jealous—that's the story.
 Why were we? God knows! ask me something easy.
 We do things, feel things, sometimes, without knowing
 The reason why. As far as I remember
 I hated Judy—Judy hated me.
 At five years old she stuck her tongue out at me;
 At ten years old we pulled each other's hair;
 At fifteen—well—she stole my sweetheart from me.
 We had a way of smiling at each other—
 So innocent it seemed, and oh so sweet!—
 That had the basilisk beaten to a frazzle.
 Look, I can do it still, I've had such practice!—
 We lowered our lids—like this—; and smiled—like this! . . .

So, we grew up. And one fine day this Punch
 Came roaring into town, with all his stories

Of women weeping for him, dying for him,
And all the rest. Of course, no one believed him—
No one, that is, but Judy! We all saw
The coward that he was,—a mouse for courage,
Ran if you raised your voice! But Judy, somehow,
(Though, to be sure, she never was too clever)
Believed him: yes, she thought him *so* romantic,
Oh, so unusual! And she lost no time
In setting after him . . . Oh, well, you know
What fools men are—(you're one yourself)—and Punch
Was no exception, rather worse than most:
Crazy for love, went smirking around women
Tongue hanging out, his little eyes revolving
In search of titbits—fawning, leering, sidling;
And knowing this, of course, we laughed at him . . .
So Judy found him easy: though I won't say
She didn't use the few wits God had lent her.
Before he knew it, Punch had been seduced,—
Trussed up and married . . . Gone—another hero!

Now for confession. And it's not so easy
As kissing under aspen leaves in moonlight.
First, as for Punch, I will confess I liked him—
Well, more than half! Repulsive, ugly, bestial,
Coward and sneak—I knew him all these things,
As who could not. But still, there was about him
When he was young, as then he was, some presence,
Some swagger of the flesh, vivid and subtle,
That could not help but make a woman's body
Tingle with secret pleasure. There you have it!
You see us now, girls, spinsters, and old women,
Watching behind our shutters when he passed:
Shuddering with a pleased ecstatic horror
If he should speak to us or smile to us;
And yet, oh, hating him! Sometimes I think
It's not the saint we love men for, but satyr:
The mouth too loose with constant lippish thinking
Of fevered kisses, and the little eyes
Malicious and provocative that smear you
With drivel of desire. It's true we hate him,
Yet hate, sometimes, is not so unlike love:

We try to scorn him out, to laugh him down,
Yet feel our features changing, under his,
To mirror him . . . our mouths grow loose as his,
Corruption thrills the flesh. Unless we shriek
And break the spell, we're one more atom lost
In the terrific maelstrom of the blood.
Punch had the satyr's face, the satyr's body,
The twinkle of shrewd eyes, the wag of the leg,
That stiffens flesh. I hated him—and liked him.
You see then how I felt, when Judy came
And sighed, and smiled, and whisperingly confided
(All to enrage me!) how she'd caught her monster—
Limed the leaves, led him into the chamber . . .
You see then how I laughed and tweaked her ear,
Patted her hand and said 'You clever Judy,'
With furies in my heart: I could have killed her . . .
Poor fool! she might as well have said in words
What with her snaky smile she said so plainly—
'I've beaten you at last!'—

I smiled, of course . . .
But none the less revenge was coiling in me
With watchful eyes. And while the vixen snickered
Secretly there beside me, I was thinking
Already of this satyr, Punch, her husband,
And of her ruin through him. Give me credit!
Oh, give me credit! I am sometimes clever.
I saw the whole thing through from start to finish!
I saw a moonlit garden in my mind,
With Punch there, like a satyr, trampling lilies,
Wallowing among lilac leaves, and snorting,—
Or whining, rather,—his bristly passion for me:
Lifting his great red hands up in the moonlight
Under my window: or coming over the wall
With one leg up, and anguish on his face,
And the moon behind his head—just like a halo!
Fantastic sight! I was already laughing.
The moon herself might well turn red to see it.
And as for Judy—I saw her at her window
Waiting for Punch, alone and cold in the moonlight,

With little hard-fixed eyes distilling poison . . .
Rapture! I almost loved her at that moment.

Why bore you with details? You need no telling
How women do such things. You know me well,
Know all my tricks, know how I laugh or twitter,
Smile timidly with dark eyes gleaming sidelong,
Let fall my hand,—as if in carelessness,—
Upon your arm; or lean one breast against you
To whisper you some most ingenuous secret!
H'm! . . . Magic! . . . Magic of flesh! You too have felt it
And thrilled to it. You've heard it in the evening
Shaking a devilish music in the darkness
Of passionate thought; bats are abroad in gardens;
The grass is soft to lie on; and the moonlight
Goes over you like hands. Can flesh resist it?
Poor foolish flesh! pour wine for pigs and bears,
Get them so drunk they cannot stand, but squeal
Lying upon their helpless backs, and blinking
At fifteen suns: their drunkenness is nothing
To the helpless lunacy of human flesh
Tipsy with lust. You've seen it crawl and slaver,
You've seen it dance its idiot dance in moonlight
With eyes upturned so imbecile and wistful:
And, oh, what caperings! . . . Well, then, for spite
And little else (except what I've confessed)
You see me, in a green gown, leaning slowly
To play on Punch these delicate fleshly harpings.
You see me dance with him while Judy watches,
Her blue eyes darting hatred among swift dancers,
Following us, in lazy convolutions,
Among the chords and discords . . . You can see
The panic heartbeats in those eyes of hers,
For all their cruelty . . . The girl is frightened . . .
She sees Punch smile at me—in a way she knows!
She sees the twitchings of his hand behind me—
Against my flesh! She sees his eyes turned upward
In an ecstatic misery all too plain . . .
Oh, Lord, those eyes of his! They gave me nightmares.
I almost spoiled the whole thing more than once,
By laughing in his face.

Well—there's the story.

A few weeks passed and Punch was in my garden
 Just as I thought he would be; trampling lilies,
 Heaving his crooked shoulder over the wall
 Against the moon, wallowing in my lilacs:
 While Judy sat afar and waited for him.
 Sweet triumph! How I laughed and told the neighbours!
 See the red monster eating from my hand!
 The wildman come from his cave, his bones and berries,
 To waltz on his hindlegs in obedient circles!
 I give him a fan to hold, he snuffs and paws it,
 Goes home with the perfume on him, passion-draggled,
 Grunts my name in his sleep . . . Too sweet a triumph! : . .
 For now poor foolish Judy, struck with horror,
 Failed to come forward fighting—what I hoped for:
 Instead, with one scared look, she stepped down backward
 Into the dark. I mean, she killed herself.
 Not out of love for Punch! Oh, no. I'm certain.
 But out of broken pride. Yes, simply that.
 And left me feeling, somehow, somewhat foolish.

You see, then, how much truth is in his story—
 You see how much I loved him . . . There! I've told you
 The whole thing through, for you to sniff and snort on.
 Isn't it pretty? . . . Romance, with all its graces!
 Go on, be jealous now,—hate Punch! hate me!
 Tear out my heart, defile the sacred image
 Of Punch that's graven there! . . . And when you're finished—

How do you like the way I've done my hair?

HOW HE DIED

When Punch had roared at the inn for days
 The walls went round in a ringing haze,
 Miriam, through the splendour seen,
 Twinkled and smiled like Sheba's Queen,
 Jake was the devil himself, the host
 Scratched in a book like a solemn Faust;

And the lights like birds went swiftly round
With a soft and feathery whistling sound.
He seized the table with one great hand
And a thousand people helped him stand,
"Good-night!" a thousand voices said,
The words like gongs assailed his head,
And out he reeled, most royally,
Singing, amid that company.—
Luminous clocks above him rolled,
Bells in the darkness heavily tolled,
The stars in the sky were smoothly beating
In a solemn chorus, all repeating
The tick of the great heart in his breast
That tore his body, and would not rest.

Singing, he climbed the elusive street,
And heard far off his footsteps beat;
Singing, they pushed him through the door,
And he fell full length on the darkened floor . . .
But his head struck sharply as he fell
And he heard a sound like a broken bell;
And then, in the half-light of the moon,
The twittering elvish light of June,
A host of folk came round him there,—
Sheba with diamonds in her hair,
Solomon thrumming a psaltery,
Judas Iscariot dark of eye,
Satan and Faustus and Lorraine,
And Heliogabalus with his train . . .
The air was sweet with a delicate sound
Of silk things rustling on the ground,
Jewels and silver twinkled, dim,
Voices and laughter circled him . . .

After a while the clock struck two,
A whisper among the audience flew,
And Judy before him came and knelt
And kissed him; and her lips, he felt,
Were wet with tears . . . She wore a crown,
And amethysts, and a pale green gown . . .
After a while the clock struck three

And Polly beside him, on one knee,
Leaned above him and softly cried,
Wearing a white veil like a bride.
One candle on the sill was burning,
And Faustus sat in the corner, turning
Page after page with solemn care
To count the immortal heartbeats there.
Slow was the heart, and quick the stroke
Of the pen, and never a word he spoke;
But watched the tears of pale wax run
Down from the long flame one by one.
Solomon in the moonlight bowed,
The Queen of Sheba rolled abroad;
Like a madonna carved in stone
Judy in starlight waddled alone.
Tears were glistening on her cheek,
Her lips were awry, she could not speak.
After a while the clock struck four,
And Faustus said "I can wait no more:
I've entered the heartbeats, every one,
And now the allotted time is done."
He dipped his pen, made one more mark,
And clapped his book. The room grew dark.
At four o'clock Punch turned his head
And "I forgive you all," he said. . . .

At five o'clock they found him dead.

PART II

MOUNTEBANK CARVES HIS PUPPET OF WOOD

HE CONCEIVES HIS PUPPET TO BE STRUGGLING WITH A NET

I

As evening fell, and Punch crept out of the wood
And saw the valley before him (like my life,
Stretched out before me, waiting there? he thought)
And saw the sun go melting redly down
Behind bare oaks, and the long shadows, fanlike,
Whirling across the quiet fields, he pondered
On the simplicity, the tranquil beauty, even,
Of morning, twilight, afternoon, or noon,—
So clear by contrast to the nagging jangle
Of his own days! . . . Dry branches caught his feet,
The snapping of them teased his brain to folly,
He clawed at cobwebs that wiped across his cheek,
Inwardly snarled, was maddened, and once more thought,—
Letting his restless eyes rove, seeing nothing,—
His life was a buzzing fly, vainly struggling
To loose weak wings from the glutinous web of fate.
How was it other men could live so simply?
How was it they could love, yet go unscathed,
Walk freely, laugh, and make it all a story?
Or did they lie?—The red sun swelled and sank,
A huge red bubble poised upon the hilltop:
Vermilion clouds flew over it and faded:
The sky, from orange, turned pale green, faint blue;
And the bare boughs of trees, flung up against it,
Frozen and still and black, seemed like great claws.

II

Well, then, if others lied, he too would lie . . .
These faces of the smiling men he knew,
Baker and constable and mayor and hangman,

What did they mean? Were they, as they pretended,
Such gloating misers of illegal riches? . . .
As their imagined faces swam before him,
Ruddy or pale, they seemed to avert their eyes,—
Like those who close their windows to a burglar.
Ah! that was it—they lied. And they, like him,
Walked always warily, for fear of nets,
Ran hard in darkness when they thought none saw them,
And, in their secret chambers, wept for terror.
He laughed at this; because he saw so clearly
On a dark moonless night, along the street,
Half frantic, panting, with his mouth wide open,
The white-faced baker speeding from his shadow.
Yes, they were liars, all,—and he would lie . . .
Although, of course, some things might be accomplished—
Even by him . . . even by him, indeed!—
He picked a stick up, cracked it with his hands,
Smiled at his conscious strength, pressed hard his feet
Into the withered grass, and heard life singing;
Lights came out of the darkened earth like flowers
And swam on the lustrous air . . . they were the lights
Of windows in the village, candles behind them . . .
And as for women . . . but at the thought of women
He thought of Judy only, pale-haired Judy . . .
Judy with wide blue eyes, eternal Judy! . . .
There was a grave for Judy, and he would dig it;
Or had he dug it,—was he digging now,
With every thought?—He paused, with step suspended,
In a cool sort of horror; he seemed to feel
Himself a shovel, used by relentless fate,
To dig that grave . . . was lifted up and thrust,
Lifted again . . . He shivered and then stepped forward,
Seeing the face of Judy eddying down
On a black coiling current into darkness.
This was a kind of madness, and he forbade it.

III

Judy!—Lying beside her in the moonlight
He feigned a sleep, and turned, and through the window
Watched how the crooked moon went slowly up

Among black elm-boughs, driving out the stars.
 And here was Judy sleeping so beside him
 While fate in him, as in a cup, mixed poison.
 Black thoughts, like webs, he softly put around her,
 Quietly back and forth. On her white skin,—
 The moonlight touched one shoulder, made it dazzle—
 He seemed to see these thoughts, like black webs, falling,
 Knitting her fast for death . . . And who, above her,
 Hung like the bearded spider . . . he, or fate?
 And why was she so marked for death at all?
 Of course, if he had nerve, as heroes should have,
 He'd kill her now,—smother her with a pillow,
 Strangle her with his hands, or cut her throat . . .
 But thinking this, his lips grew dry, his hands
 Weakened, his breath was hurried, he closed his eyes
 To shut the hideous room out, known too well,
 And all that went with it . . . himself and Judy . . .
 How would the baker do it, or the hangman?
 Poison? He licked his lips and poured it slowly,
 Saw the green bubbles sliding . . . No, not poison . . .
 Judy would know, accuse him before she died,
 Or what was worse, stare at him, in her writhings,
 With new-found horror . . . Darkness closed him in,
 No door of light there was, he seemed imprisoned:
 Chained and encircled . . . He, himself, was helpless.
 All that could help him now was what bound him—
 Fate . . . and fate, as always, seemed just grinning.

The village clock struck suddenly into his musings . . .
 Twelve molten golden plummets of slow sound
 Plunged heavily downward in a void of silence,
 Leaving a surge of air . . . He saw the tombstones
 Glistening in the moonlight, ghostly rows,
 And felt, as it were, the earth creep up about him . . .
 Was he a shovel in the hands of fate,
 Digging a grave? Digging a grave for Judy?
 Well, it was strange to think that he had loved her—
 Perhaps still loved her—yet desired her buried!
 When she caressed him next, or stood on tiptoe
 To prim her lips for his, he'd think of this;
 It would be hard, he thought, to meet her eyes . . .

The moon, by now, had climbed above the elm-tree,—
Swam freely; through black claws reached after it.
The stars hummed round it still, though at a distance.
Would he be ever as free as the moon was, even?
After a while he slept, and in his sleep
Dreamed of a grave that opened,—without shovels.

IV

Judy in sunlight combed her hair out slowly,
Tossing her small head backwards. Now her elbows
Flashed in the sun; her blue eyes, in the mirror,
Sought for his eyes, and smiled; the streaming hair
Dazzled him. Yet, desiring so to kill her,
And being afraid, his hatred only hardened,
His hands, that dared not hurt her, could not touch.
Did she perceive this? Did some whisper reach her,
Chilling her blood? She smiled, and went on combing,
The smile died slowly, meeting no smile for answer,
The silence deepened, prolonged, seemed fraught with meanings.

If she could know the dream he had dreamed last night,
Of an earthy grave that dug itself beneath her,
And swallowed her without sound—what would she say?
Laugh for a moment, perplexed, and hide her trouble,—
Or think the thing a trifle?—pat his cheek,
Abuse him, mockingly, for sleeping treason?
He watched her elbows moving, watched the comb
Gliding the golden length of hair, and thought
(First with a start, but after with composure)
If she could only know one instant, clearly,
How much he hated her and wished her dead—
Would she not die, or—even—kill herself?
Just here, half laughing, Judy turned towards him
With something on her lips to say: but seeing
A cold glare in his eyes grew suddenly grave
And cried “Why, what’s the matter?” He, surprised,
Guilty, caught with a red knife in his hands,
Lowered his eyes, and laughed and said “Oh, nothing!”;
And left her staring, large-eyed, after him.
Even as he left, his guilt had changed to anger.

Yes, there it was—the everlasting sea
 Flung upon the shore: the sand was there—
 But it was there before him, soft, supple,
 Washing his hands and feet: the waves below—
 The more because she was so small and thin,
 Flashed among his fingers . . . She, he said,
 He might have said: "The sunlight was so sweet,
 Freedom! What had he thought? This was the sea,
 On all he thought and felt, waves and beauty,
 These were the years of his mind's life,
 Unexpressed life . . . Was that? Was that?
 Or could one say, with still a word in his
 No, not if one was just he was a dream,
 He walked on grass, sand, in the sun and shade,
 Saw all was movement, "So the future"
 He thought, "the movement, I am certain."
 Yes, with a rising tide, a rising sea,
 That though one might not believe, one might be

Polly had wandered far from the beach—
 Prowling not in. When she was there, saying
 She turned her back and sang . . . "Cannon in gold"
 Was she mouthing him, or was she not?
 He stood, half listening, looking downward,
 Wondered if she had seen him. His head pulsed,
 The blood sang swelling melodies in his brain,
 He thought, with his eyes, his chance had come
 To do as other men did by the sea—
 Fling prudence to the wind and take his chance,
 The blood sang small melodies in his brain,
 His lowered head was hammering at his ribs,
 The sky was blue and birds were singing to him,
 Polly was singing, sunlight flashed on the water,
 And he alone seemed unseen under the sky . . .
 Would she resent his tramp, make fun of him? . . .
 Desire was strong in him, and he stepped downward.

Polly (the witch) played Jock's music on him;
 Teased at the darker currents of his blood

While seeming not to tease. She chattered, simpered,
Narrowed her black eyes on him in dark questions,
Plucked at her dress with lazy fingers, sighed,
And when she saw the half-cowed tiger rising
Behind his eyes, leered sidelong at his hump
(She knew he watched) and froze him to the marrow.
Basking in sunlight, somehow she contrived
To strip her body bare,—to lie before him
In naked loveliness: her clothes were vapour,
Her beauty burned them off, her flesh sang through them,
The white skin flashed before him . . . When, half frantic,
With hearing, seeing, feeling such clear music,
And blind with a sudden violence not his own
He flushed, and caught her hand, and tried to kiss her,
She suddenly laughed. "Now, hunchback, don't be silly!"
She smoothed her hair, looked at him coldly, frowned,—
Then rose and walked away . . . He felt like crawling.

VI

The throbbing music she so played upon him
Grew, in his dream, to a beauty past all bearing!
A bright and baleful light in shafts from heaven
Slanted upon a green hill; trees were shaken,
The leaves flew down upon it and whirled upon it
As if it were a wind; it swept and thrilled him.
There, as he built a wall to keep the sea out,
A mist-white sea that flashed without wave or sound,
She came before him and lifted her hands and laughed,
Naked and fair . . . But just as he leaned to take her
Black webs like rain came ravelling out of the sky,
Fastened upon her, meshed her, bound her helpless,
And whirled her away on air. He woke in horror:
Half doubting if it were Polly after all—;
Half hoping, half believing, it might be Judy.

VII

Waking from this his life seemed somehow changed! . . .
His body was light; the air seemed singing about him,
Moonlight roared through the elm-trees like a river,

The trees seemed ready to walk; even the houses
Seemed only to pause on earth for a moment, ready
To tilt on the stellar air and soar away.
Bewitched again! this time by Polly Prim.
He desired to dance, and sat up straight in bed
With gnomes and elves cavorting in his brain;
And then he remembered how absurd he was,
And felt his hump, and the stiffness of his legs.
Well,—whatever the outcome,—this was music,—
Spring with a million green leaves glistened in him:
His hate of Judy rose in a smoke of laughter . . .
Whether she lived or died he could avoid her—
Why waste his thoughts upon her? Love was better.
And was it sure the girl was laughing at him?
Had he, in fact, seemed so ridiculous?
One instant, he was hot with a throbbled confusion,
His hands were tight. He heard her laughing coldly,
Saw the clear devilish eyes, and felt like crawling . . .
With a slight turn and shrug, though, these reflections
Vanished . . . He felt instead her cool skin touch him,
And saw himself, the next time at the inn,
Winking, slapping his knee, and confiding slyly
To the baker or the hangman how he, Punch,
(Despite his ugliness—so all too obvious!)
Had half seduced that Polly Prim already,—
Boldly touched her knee with his hand, and kissed her,—
In fact, could have the rest of her for the asking! . . .
Warm preludes started murmurings in his brain.

VIII

“No doubt” (he thought) “this web is still around me;
But Polly weaves it now, and so it glistens,
It sings about me, I can dance within it . . .”
He put his hands out, thinking he might feel it
Shimmering on the air. If net this was
It was a pleasant net, and well worth having.
Wherever it touched it burned . . . He walked within it,
Remembering, with a bland astonishment,
How he had railed so, railed at hell and heaven,

For spreading snares for him. . . . And here was Polly!
Polly, with sombre hair,—and pale hands lifted
To play such music on him!—Feeling this,
(As, swimming, one might feel the cool of water
In streaks and whorls translucent flowing round him,
With a slight seethe of bubbles,) he walked gaily,
Forgetting much. Blue days like flowers gigantic
Opened above his head, flashed far above him,
Were slowly closed. Birds hung suspended in them,
Burned in the blue, revolved, or lazily sailed,
Glided away, were lost. Faint voices thrilled him
Seeming to echo voices once familiar
Now half-forgotten, vague, and strange in meaning . . .
The moon itself,—(blown like a silver bubble
In the blue air)—seemed but an idle symbol
Of time and fate, as idle. It passed slowly,
Merged in a foam of cloud, was softly lost . . .
Bound as a victim in such web of music,
Spun to his end in skeins of sound like fire—
This fate was sweet! It hardly seemed like fate . . .
Thinking these things, and always seeing Polly
Dancing before him in a clear depth of sunlight
(Uncaptured yet—he shivered—) he kissed Judy
And touched her arm, and smiled, and never winced . . .
He had forgotten, now, his dream of shovels.

IX

One morning, meeting Judy on the stairway,
He noticed,—for the first time,—something strange:
She eyed him palely, raised one hand, seemed shrinking
Faintly upon herself to let him pass . . .
Some threat there was in this—he went more slowly,
Probing that look . . . What was the woman thinking? . . .
It was as if, in some way, death were in her
And looked out through her eyes. It was as if
He had glanced in through the open door of a tomb
And seen cold shadow there . . . Was Judy planning
The death which he himself, in thought, had hoped for?
Terror came down upon him, his feet were heavy,
The sunlight darkened, he suddenly saw his fate

(That fate which he himself had set in motion!)
Moving with sinister speed, looming above him,
Roaring among his trees!—His hands fell weak,
His cowardly eyes found nothing they could look at,
He sat among withered leaves . . . Judy was dying!
Judy was killing herself! Judy was dead!
The leaves flew round his feet, dust whirled among them,
The sun went over the sky, and swelled and sank,
The hours were struck, all things went on, resistless,
And he was whirled along with them . . . Well, truly,
Had he desired her dead, or hinted at it? . . .
Had he been murderous, even in words? . . .
Had he looked at her with a look of hatred? . . .
When he found heart at length, and slowly limped
Across grey fields, and saw the house, it seemed
Quietly changed. It seemed to keep a secret.
Its secret lay on the kitchen floor, in darkness.
He held a light above her, stared, was speechless.
Judy had taken poison and was dead.

X

Polly, upon his anguished summons, came
To dress his Judy, lay her out in satin,
And spend the night. He sat, and heard her moving,
Moving to and fro in the room above him,
Pulling the curtains down, opening drawers:
Moving, when she remembered to, on tiptoe . . .
What was she doing, all this time, up there? . . .
He wished the floor were glass, that he might see her . . .
And Judy lying there! He thought of Polly,
Living—and Judy, dead. This living body,
Turning there in the presence of the dead,
Bending above it, touching it with warm hands,
Rising to move away, with clear dark eyes—
Its beauty dazzled him; his flesh was quickened,
The blood sang teasing melodies in his brain,
Provoked a silent cry. Where was he drifting?
Where was he—rather—being swept, and helpless?
A gesture of struggle passed like a ghost before him,
He sank back weakly, knowing his efforts useless;

And hearing the soft steps ring once more above him
Surrendered to their music. Flares of pain
Rose in his heart, but through the pain that music
Steadily sang . . . He knew himself most ugly,
And closed his eyes for a moment not to see it.
Red-faced, lascivious, hump-backed, and a coward!
Where the strings pulled, he moved. He was a puppet.

When all was still—(still pond and no more moving!—
The phrase flew into his mind and laughed at him)
He went upstairs to bed; and the dread thing happened.
Faint fragrance stirred on the quiet air. At first
He heard no sound. He found his door and opened,
And stood there, silent. And as he stood there, trembling,
(Or was he shivering? for the air was cool)
Thinking how gross he was, how red and ugly,
And wondering if he dared to do this thing,—
With Judy lying dead, there, in her room;
Or if he had the courage; well, just then,
Polly came into the hall, and smiled at him,
Combing her hair . . . She combed her hair and smiled,
Lazily smiled, tilting her dark head backward,
Bending her smooth white arms. He stood transfixed . . .
Slow savage chords throbbed in his brain: his mouth
Too dry for speech, his feet too weak for moving . . .
“What is it?” Polly asked. His smile was foolish.
He did not know what answer was intended,—
Whether she knew what music clashed within him,
Pretending not to hear it (hearing perhaps
The same great cymbals in her own dark veins)
Or whether, if she knew, she only teased him,—
And hearing him confess, would feign a horror! . . .
He was afraid . . . “Judy is dead” (he thought)
“I am alone . . .” he raised his hands to his eyes,
Pretending a wave of grief. Polly, at this,
Came to him quickly, stood before him, touched him . . .
“Now don’t be foolish!”—He looked up, saw her smile,
(That slow soft smile again! What did it mean?)
And as he looked she took a slight step backward . . .
Silence came down upon them. He felt a net
Falling between them. He desired to move, to break it,

To touch her warm white body that sang before him,
But could not stir. If he could lift his hand—
What could prevent his touching her arms, her hair,
Her round white throat? . . . Then, as the silence deepened,
Smiling a little again, she walked back slowly,
Paused at her doorway—or seemed to pause—one instant,
To gleam through narrowed eyelids darkly at him,—
And softly closed her door. . . . What did she mean? . . .
Should he go after her—knock at the door? . . .
The loud blood hammered and swelled against his temples,
Desire and fear confused him. He stood helpless.
He entered his room, sank wearily on his bed,
Stared through the window at a night of starlight
And cursed his fate; and all about was silence. . . .

Judy herself was not more dead than he.

XI

“Is this the house where Judy lived?”

“Yes,—long ago.”

“The house where Judy lived and died?”

“Ah! . . . long ago.” . . .

He lay in the dark. Why did this idiot jingle
Keep running in his head? What did it mean?
Had he grown old already?—He clutched the pillow
And looked out through the pale blue square of window
Between black twisted branches at the stars.
Yes. There they were, just as they were before,
Silver and blue and green and twinkling crimson,
Yellow and white . . . they danced and laughed and trembled,
Pirouetted and sang, yet never moved.
And there was Judy, dead, in a darkened room,
Never to comb her hair again, or, laughing
Run down the stairs, or snap the stems of violets. . . .
And here was he, hump-backed and red and bestial,
Driving her through his thoughts; and there was Polly
Sleeping,—or lying awake, perhaps, to smile!
He watched a thin bough, thrust against his window,
Dipping upon the air against the stars
As if it caught them and let them go again . . .

It was a claw. Fate itself was a claw.
 His life was full of claws. He was a shovel
 Held in such claws . . . and made to dig a grave,
 A grave for Judy. And there was Judy waiting . . .
 Or was it himself had died and would be buried? . . .
 The earth piled up above him, he could not breathe.

"Is this the house where Judy lived?"

"Yes—long ago."

"The house where Judy lived and died?"

"Ah!—long ago."

XII

Polly, he thought, was lying in her room
 Stretched out upon the white bed, straight and slender;
 Her long dark hair spread out upon the pillow.
 Perhaps she lay awake still, gazing vaguely
 Down that white length, and through the tall blue window
 At these same stars . . . perhaps she turned her head
 And lazily closed her eyes, to shut them out . . .
 These thoughts played through his mind like a melody,—
 Glissandos, shimmering downward from the treble
 Sharply to crash among deep chords of passion . . .
 And through these tones the thought of Judy came
 Like freezing silence . . . Judy! . . . Judy! . . . Judy! . . .
 What did the word mean? What had it ever stood for? . . .
 Judy lying alone in a darkened room,
 Her eyelids closed, her hands upon her breast!
 If she could rise, and live again,—he'd hate her . . .
 But dead? . . . He closed his eyes, and in the darkness
 That roiled his mind ran fast through a wind of voices . . .
 If he had killed her it had been unwitting.

XIII

Unravelling in his dream from vague beginnings,
 Like a melody evolved from muttered tunings,
 These things grew strange in size. Against a wall
 Quivering in a light's unsteady yellow,
 A shadow fell; and Polly stood before him

Naked and fair. He moved and caught and kissed her,
She half averted her face, she strained away,
Delirium fused his veins. Then down the stairs,
Bringing a sort of darkness as they came,
He heard the steps of Judy ring,—each step
Spreading a darkness and reverberating.
Polly was gone. He trembled, he desired to hide,
He stood by the wall. . . . When Judy came at last,
Standing before him suddenly,—warm and young,—
He saw that she was pregnant; and remorse
Stifled his heart. Ashamed and shy and awkward
He hesitated towards her, touched her, kissed her,
Said (what he had not said so long) "I love you!"—;
Then leaned against the wall and cried like a child.
She looked at him surprised,—and tenderly,—
And slowly walked away.

Later, his dream

(But after he had waked and stared in anguish
At the dark ceiling above him, vaguely white)
Brought him a hidden sound of Polly's laughter,
The clear notes blown from nowhere. There he seemed
To run from some one, some one with a knife—
The constable?—he did not turn to see,
But ran; till suddenly, thinking he was safe,
He saw the man before him in a chair
With his back turned; and stabbed him, then, and killed
him . . .
As the man moved his head to look, he woke.

XIV

He walked in a rain to see his Judy buried.
The sky was filled with the slanting spears of rain,
Grey spears of rain. Over the tops of trees
Whistled the wind-torn clouds. The ruts were gleaming,
Puddles were ringed and rippled. At the churchyard
They found the grave already dug, raw earth
Heaped up beside it, pitted and dark with rain.
This was the last injustice! This was monstrous.
They lowered the coffin awkwardly into the grave,

On the bare resonant boards that hid his Judy
 The rain drummed monotones, wet earth was shovelled;
 And suddenly, able to bear the thing no longer,
 He turned his back, stared at the rain-lashed grass,
 And saw how cruel was life. The church-bell tolled,
 The tones were whirled away as soon as struck,
 Tumbled upon the wind, and lost in rain,
 Or beaten down to the ground. Among worn grass-blades
 Rain-bubbles winked and ran with delicate seething,
 Bare trees whipped in the wind . . . the day was madness.

Dusk fell. He crossed the fields alone. His house
 Looked old and cold and small and time-forgotten.

"Is this the house where Judy lived?"

"Yes,—long ago. . . ."

"The house where Judy lived and died?"

"Ah!—long ago."

He thrust the door, stood in the silent hallway,
 And heard no sound save whirl and splash of rain
 And tick of clocks; alone and loud and foolish
 In the slow mouldering and decay of time.

XV

Through the tall window, on the brown curve of the hill,
 He watched pale silvery arrows of rain descending;
 Slow long arpeggios thrilled and chimed in his heart.
 The soft drops brushed on the window and were muted.
 The grey-white sky above him whirled with rain.
 "Well, then . . . if Polly refused me . . . Judy tricked me . . .
 But *did* they now,—or did I misinterpret? . . .
 No! I should wrong myself if I should think so . . .
 Have I not half seduced the girl already?
 Did I not . . . kill the other?"—Thinking this
 He seemed to feel that horrible net once more,
 But thrust it harshly aside. "No, I am free:
 No man or law or fate can change my purpose,
 No god defeat my will! If, on that hillside,
 Old Nick himself, and Doctor Faustus with him,
 Should spread the world before me, for my soul—

Setting before me Venus with bright hair,
 Towers of silver, walls inlaid with sapphires,—
 I should refuse. No fate shall take my soul! . . .
 And where is she so proud, who, to my cunning,
 Shall not surrender her crown, her heart, and all? . . .”
 He was tired, he bowed his head; and in a dream
 The Queen of Sheba smiled on a throne before him,
 A far faint clashing of music reached his ears,
 A ghostly pageant of crimson shimmered and smouldered
 And swayingly died away. . . . And death itself
 Went dwindling into the grey rain, only pausing
 At the sky's edge to lift one menacing arm . . .
 Or was it only a gaunt tree, silhouetted,
 Flinging a long black branch out, one great claw? . . .

.
 The dark dream spread before him, like a valley
 Made strange with music. Birds flew upward from it;
 Far down flashed moving lights. He closed his eyes
 And smiled, and took one step, and then another;
 And groping raised his hands. . . . The air was warm.

This was the valley of forgetfulness
 Where painful thoughts and frustrate deeds would fade . . .
 He saw an orange moon rise, strangely large,
 Above soft trees. Among the unbroken vineyards
 Maenads came out to dance, he heard them singing,
 The leaves swished back behind them, laughter descended . . .
 This was the valley of love and lawlessness;
 Where thirst was quenched, with no satiety,
 And flesh and stream and tree were all immortal.
 Cymbals softly clashed in the moonlit forest
 Far down before him, the undulant air was fragrant
 With flight of ghostly roses; out of the silence, voices
 Rose faint and clear. . . . He slowly descended the hill.

HE IMAGINES THAT HIS PUPPET HAS A DARK
DREAM AND HEARS VOICES

FIRST VOICE

Pave the sky with stars for Punch!
And snare in flowers a moon for him
With white rose-trees and apple trees
And cherubim and seraphim!

SECOND VOICE

Look! he comes! how tall he is!
A crown of fire is on his head;
The sky unrolls before his feet,
Green mountains fear his tread.

The meteors now like dolphins dive
Into the white wave of the sky,
Blue moons and stars around him sing
And suns triumphant cry!

THIRD VOICE

Build a house of gold for Punch,
Of gold without and silk within,
With floors of glass, and let there be
For ever there a silver din

Of music's many instruments
In slow and low amazement heard:
In every window-niche a cage,
In every cage a singing-bird.

Build it in a kingdom far;
In a forest green and deep;
Where no tears nor sorrows are,
But only song and sleep.

There to the noise of wind in trees
And many rivers winding down,
Let him forget the cares of earth
And nod a kingly crown!

FOURTH VOICE

Like a tower of brass is Punch,
And great and stately is his pace;
There is no other as tall as he,—
None with so fair a face.

Fall down, fall down, you kings of men,
Fall down before him! This is he
For whom the moon pursues her ghost
And demons bend the knee.

Woe unto you, you miscreants
Who dare the lightnings of his eyes!
His hand, how strong! His wrath, how just!
His brow, how white and wise!

FIFTH VOICE

Solomon, clown, put by your crown,
And Judas, break your tree:
Seal up your tomb and burn your cross,
Jesus of Galilee!

For here walks one who makes you seem
But atoms that creep in grass;
You are the pageant of his dream,
And he will bid you pass.

Let Rome go over the earth in gold
With trumpets harshly blown!
For here comes one whose splendour burns
More gloriously, alone.

Heliogabalus, laugh your last!
Queen Sappho, lie you down!

Punch the immortal shakes the seas
And takes the sun for crown.

SIXTH VOICE

Sheba, now let down your hair,
And play upon it with your hands,
While girls from Tal and Mozambique
Parade before in sarabands,—

Play him songs inaudible
With white hands braceleted and slim,
Or shake your hair and let it fall
And softly darken him.

Cling to him, while cymbals far
Are sweetly smitten in the dusk,
And maenads, under a haughty star,
Break the white rose for its musk:

Cling to him, and with your lips
Feed his heart on crumbs of fire
That shall, perpetually, delight,
But never slay desire!

SEVENTH VOICE

Open a window on the world
With all its sorrow, and then
When he has heard that sound a space,
Close it fast again. . . .

Sweet will it be, lapped round with ease
And music-troubled air,
To hear for a moment on the wind
A sound of far despair:

And then, to turn to lights again,
And fingers soft on strings,
While Sheba slips her bracelets off
And spreads her arms and sings. . . .

Sweet will it be, to hear far off
That gusty sound of pain,
And to remember, far away,
A world of death and rain:

And then, to close the window fast,
And laugh, and clap soft hands,
While girls from Tal and Mozambique
Parade in sarabands. . . .

Close now the window! Close it well! . . .
That slow lament of pain
Was but the dissonance that makes
Dull music sweet again.

EIGHTH VOICE

Death, you will wear a chain of gold,
And wreaths of roses white and red,
And nightlong will you dance for him
With garlands on your head.

Bring a cup and pour him wine,
And dance for him; for this is he
Who plays a jocund tune for you
But will not set you free.

Or go with thongs to scourge the world
And lay it waste; and then come back
To sorrow before him in a cage
And garb yourself in black.

A cage of gold he keeps for you! . . .
There he will watch you dance,
And fill his cup, immortally,
And laugh at circumstance.

NINTH VOICE

There is a fountain in a wood
Where wavering lies a moon:
It plays to the slowly falling leaves
A sleepy tune.

. . . The peach-trees lean upon a wall
Of gold and ivory:
The peacock spreads his tail, the leaves
Fall silently. . . .

There, amid silken sounds and wine
And music idly broken,
The drowsy god observes his world
With no word spoken.

Arcturus, rise! Orion, fall! . . .
The white-winged stars obey . . .
Or else he greets his Fellow-God;
And there, in the dusk, they play

A game of chess with stars for pawns
And a silver moon for queen:
Immeasurable as clouds above
A chess-board world they lean,

And thrust their hands amid their beards,
And utter words profound
That shake the star-swung firmament
With a fateful sound! . . .

. . . The peach-trees lean upon a wall
Of gold and ivory;
The peacock spreads his tail; the leaves
Fall silently. . . .

EPILOGUE

MOUNTEBANK FEELS THE STRINGS AT HIS HEART

In the blue twilight the puller of strings, half-tenderly
Tumbling his puppets away,—Punch, Judy, and Polly,—
Into the darkness again; Jack Ketch and Faustus,
Solomon, crowned with a crown of tinsel and silver,
Sheba with small hands lifted; Judas Iscariot
With a noose of frayed thin silk about his neck,

And the Devil himself in scarlet with white eyes leering,—
 Tumbling them into their box, the cords relaxed,
 The small world darkened, whereupon they danced and
 squeaked,—

Leaving them there in the dusk pell-mell together;
 And turning away, at last, to look from a window
 At a darker and greater world, ring beyond ring
 Of houses and trees and stars, sky upon sky,
 Space beyond silent space of clouds and planets:

Suddenly, there, as he stood at the darkening window
 Watching the glimmer of uncounted worlds in the twilight,
 A world so vast, so piercingly chorded with beauty,
 Blown and glowing in the long-drawn wind of time,—
 He saw himself,—though a god,—the puppet of gods;
 Revolving in antics the dream of a greater dreamer;
 Flung up from a sea of chaos one futile instant,
 To look on a welter of water whirling with crimson;
 And then, in an instant, drawn back once more into chaos.

. . . Was it enough, to remember that in that instant
 He had cried out in a cry of rapture and anguish? . . .
 Was it enough to believe,—if he could believe it!—
 That the faint voice crying abruptly and strangely its anguish
 Was the voice of himself? . . . Or only the voice of the
 gods? . . .
 Was he no better than Judy, or Polly,—or Punch,
 Capering about his cage of twittering dreams? . . .

Strange! As he looked from the height of the darkened window
 At the glimmer of immortal worlds below and above,
 Star beyond star, house beyond house,—soul beyond soul?—
 He imagined that Judy, there in the box behind him,
 Stirred her fellows aside and rose in the darkness
 And quavered to him . . . "Listen! you puller of strings!
 Do you think it just to call me into existence,—
 To give me a name,—and give me so little beside? . . .
 To Polly you give her laughter, to Punch his illusions,—
 To me you give nothing but death!"

She wept after this,
 Resting her small white elbows there on the box-edge,
 And waited in silence. He, meanwhile, not turning towards her,
 But resting, like her, his arms on the sill of the window,
 Watched the dark world.

“How shall I answer you, Judy? . . .
 It is true you have little but sorrow and death at my hands—
 It is true you seem hardly a shadow for Polly and Punch,—
 And this I regret! You step for a moment from darkness
 Turning, bewildered, your face in a twinkle of lamplight,
 Lift sharply your hand,—and vanish once more, and for ever.
 But Judy,—how else could I find you,—how even console you?
 I too am a puppet. And as you are a symbol for me
 (As Punch is, and Sheba—bright symbols of intricate meanings,
 Atoms of soul—who move, and are moved by, me—)
 So I am a symbol, a puppet drawn out upon strings,
 Helpless, well-coloured, with a fixed and unchanging expression
 (As though one said ‘heartache’ or ‘laughter’!) of some one who
 leans

Above me, as I above you. . . . And even this Some one,—
 Who knows what compulsion he suffers, what hands out of dark-
 ness
 Play sharp chords upon him! . . . Who knows if those hands are
 not ours! . . .

“Look then at my mind: this tiny old stage, dimly lighted,
 Whereon,—and without my permission,—you symbols parade,
 Saying and meaning such things! You, now, with your death,
 Crying out into my heart, if for only a moment!
 Punch with his devils about him, his terror of darkness!
 And Polly there laughing beside him—look now how you walk
 On the nerve-strings of all I can know, to delight me, to torture,
 To pass in a nightmare of gesture before me, how heedless
 Of me,—whom our gods have ordained to exist as your world!
 Think, now! I can never escape you. Did you call me a tyrant?
 I desire to change you—and cannot! . . . I desire to see you
 Under a pear-tree—(we’ll say that the tree is in blossom—)
 A warm day of sunlight, and laughing,—at nothing what-
 ever! . . .
 A green hill’s behind you; a cloud like a dome tops the hill;

A poplar tree, like a vain girl, leans over a mirror
 Trying on silver, then green, perplexed, but in pleasure;
 And you there, alone in the sunlight, watch bees in the pear-tree,
 Dipping the leaves; and you laugh—for no reason whatever!
 Delightful! One moment, at least, no Punch can disturb you,
 No Polly whirl dead leaves about you! You stand there un-
 troubled . . .

Thus, then, I desire to see you, to have you exist
 If only an instant; yet down come the shadows between us,
 And all they have left me is—Judy, to whom I have given
 A name, and so little beside!”

. . . There was silence a moment;
 And when he turned back, expecting, perhaps, to see Judy
 Leaning her small white elbows there on the box-edge,—
 No, not a sign. The puppets lay huddled together,
 Arms over heads, contorted, just where he had dropped them;
 Inscrutable, silent, terrific, like those made eternal
 Who stare, without thought, at a motionless world without mean-
 ing.

THE PILGRIMAGE OF FESTUS

PART I

HE PLANTS HIS BEANS IN THE EARLY MORNING

I

And at last, having sacked in imagination many cities
 And seen the smoke of them spread fantastically along the sky,
 Having set foot upon so many walls, fallen and blackened,
 And heard the harsh lamentations of women,
 And watched without pity the old men, betraying their vileness,
 Tear at their beards, and curse, and die,
 Festus, coming alone to an eastern place
 Of brown savannahs and wind-gnawed trees,
 Climbed a rock that faced alone to the northward
 And sat, and clasped his knees.

There was before him the confluence of three rivers:
One from the north, one from the east, and one from the west.
The one from the east was blue, the one from the west was green,
Black was the one from the north, and snow was on its breast.
The sound of their roaring came up in waves on the wind,
Into the tumultuous darkness of the south they went,
And Festus sat for a day and a night and watched them
And wondered what they meant.

“Look, Festus, how without regard for you and all your sorrow
The huge sun rises and crosses the sky
And your ridiculous shadow circles about you
Shortening and lengthening silently!
What does it matter to the sun that your robe is scarlet?
That the sword at your hand is old and green!
Already the winds gnaw at you, as they have gnawed at these
trees
Careless of the many things you have done and seen.”

The day ended, and the slow-wheeling magnificent constellations
Glided like lights of ships down the river of space,
And Festus was disturbed once more, and wished to speak,
And heavily raised his head at last in sorrow,
And turned towards the stars his face,
And said: “Look, Festus, how yet once more the immortals
Kindle their delicate lanterns and walk in the sky
While you on a lonely hill sit alone in sadness
And remember that you must die!
Look at the stars, Festus, treader of kingdoms,
You who carried the world like a bird in a cage,
You whose heart is a desert, gaunt with winter,
You whose sword in youth was a sevenfold lightning
Now worn and green with age!
Look! the immortals once more in the sky of your heart
The immortals you scorned and forgot
Walk in the dim blue gardens softly apart
To a music you taught them not! . . .”

Festus in starlight watched how the three great rivers,
Bearing perpetual stars on their breasts, roared down
To gorges and chasms and desolate plains

And jungles of death, and labyrinthine cities
Swept to pale harmonies by suns and rains;
And thought of the thousands of nights and days like music
Woven by him, and the roses of love and death
Fallen in petals in the darkness of his heart;
And he sent among them a breath
And set them blowing and trembling again, on graves,
On the stones of streets, by door and path and wall,
Whirled in the air from the boughs of swinging trees
To stream like stars on the wind and slowly fall
For the hands of children, the hair of women, the hearts of lovers,
The coffins waiting beneath the swinging trees,
And the myriad eyes that in his veins went to and fro
Seeking a dream forever and finding no ease.

"Listen, Festus! How the multitudes within you
Make a slow misty music of their own!
See how the walls of cities grow young again
With the spring upon them blown!
And you too, Festus! Treader in blood of kingdoms!
You walk in a moonlit wind of dream
And you and the worlds about you are young once more
And blossom and tinkle and sing and gleam!"

Then Festus laughed, for he looked in his heart and saw
His worlds made young again
And heard the sound of a many-peopled music
And joyously into the world of himself set forward
Forgetting the long black aftermath of pain.

II

"Listen, Festus! The music, as you lie sleeping,
Builds a world of hills and stars about you,
Cities of silver in forests of blue!
Bells are jingling, birds are saluting the daybreak,
The horns are spreading a meadow of gold for you.
Walls of stone and jewels rise in the music
Like exhalations laced with fire,
Children are playing and laughing beneath them,
The dew flashes on every spire! . . ."

. . . Festus lies alone, and watches across the ceiling
Vague spokes of shadows wheeling
Ghostly fantasias from the crowded world:
A woman passes in a vortex of light, a child passes,
Echoes and shadows and perfumes are faintly whirled . . .

! “Listen, Festus! The music is making trees,
The music is making rivers and towers! . . .
Music flows over the pools of sky in clouds
And scatters a tinkle of showers! . . .
Far off there, on a balcony of the wind,
The scarf of a maiden gleams,
In a rose-gold shaft of sun her soft hair glistens,
The clouds open, the tower is kindled and beams!
The waves of the river in blue and pearl-strewn green
Flash down over rocks to the sea,
Walls of marble waver upon them and shatter,
And the mist of the willow-tree!”

. . . Festus stands in the sunlight at the window
And cruelly looks at roofs and rivers and skies,
And the trees tossing their never-escaping waves
Of swirling leaves, and laughs, and shuts his eyes.
“How many times this music has deceived me!
How many times I stoop and cup my hand
Thinking to capture in it the sparkle of water,—
And quench, once more, my thirst with sand!”

But as he closes his eyes, the music, circling,
Comes laughing about him and softly sings,
The trees whisper, the meadows tremble, and it seems to him
The music touches him with soft hands, the music, dancing about
him,
Is a dance of immortal maidens in flaming eternal rings.

III

Festus, planting beans in the early morning,
Far in his heart, in a solitary plain,
Has a vision: the sun, like a golden monster
Heaving his crimson flanks from the streaming darkness,

No sooner seeks to rise than he is slain:
Out of a vast sarcophagus of cloud
Pours the black death of rain.

. . . Festus, holding beans in the palm of his hand,
Stands astonished. . . . But this is least of all.
For as the rain comes wavering over the fields
Threshing the earth with silver in its fall,
Gathering into its numberless shafts of silver
What light there is, and leaving the sky a pall,

He sees, in the arrowy darkness,
In a flashing garment of rain
A grey man like a pilgrim
Come slowly over the plain.
On his shoulder is a phantom burden—
He stoops, his white beard glistens,
For an instant he pauses, solitary in the rain,
And stands and listens.

And his eyes, for a moment, rest on those of Festus,
And Festus, troubled, lets fall the beans from his hand . . .
"It is hard, Festus, that in this soul of yours,
This so colossal world of hills and oceans,
Forests and cities of men,
You keep us here forever in outer darkness,
Wretched, in wind and rain.
Shall we do nothing but feel upon our backs
The eternal lash of rain?
Shall we do nothing, day after day forever,
But plant these beans again?"

Festus guiltily looks at his beans a moment.
Lying white and rain-washed at his feet:
It appears to him that the rain is a gorgeous music,
Sorrowful, and slow, and sweet;
Telling of hills that lie beyond the plain
And beyond the hills a sea;
With beautiful women going and coming forever
Through stone-bright streets, by walls and domes of silver,
In a sound of music to towers of filigree. . . .

“ . . . It is hard, Festus, that in this soul of yours,
This world of clanging star and sun
With the horns of glory blowing from space to space
And the paean of daybreak just begun,
You keep us here alone in a wind-worn plain
Stooping to plant these beans in the dark and the rain. . . .”

Then Festus, lifting his eyes,
Watches the old man pass
Slowly among the shafts of the rain
Across the wind-lashed grass,
On his shoulder a phantom burden,
Till somehow he is gone:
Leaving a thinning ghost of rain
And Festus standing alone.

And Festus, resting his hands upon his hoe,
Watches the ranks of the purple rain ascending
To the cloud sarcophagus from which they came.
And the sun once more swims up like a golden monster,—
Heaving out of the streaming dark his hissing flanks of flame.

IV

Festus, lighting his pipe against the sun,
Smokes in the furrows, regarding tenderly
His beans which, one by one,
Now shoulder through the dark earth sturdily.
This clear green neck, so exquisitely bent—
See how it struggles till the stone relent! . . .
A long warm wind flows by
Under a clanging sky;
Poplars, a myriad shape,
Incline and shiver, whirl and escape;
The clods grow dry;
And one by one, in delicate russets and greens,
Festus observes his beans
Exult from the humid earth, intently spring
Into the sunlight. . . . And it seems to him
That, if he listens, he will hear them sing. . . .

"Ah, Festus! Look how we,
 Who in our caverns could not see,
 But only over the blind walls blindly grope
 With sensitive hands . . . having no hearts to hope,
 Scarcely a dream to guide us,—
 Look now how we
 Press from the black soil arrogantly,
 As with loud drums and trumpets bravely blown,
 And a shrill laugh for him who dares deride us! . . .
 Have you no cave, no sunlight, of your own? . . ."

. . . Festus, blowing the blue smoke from his pipe
 Pauses a moment in his morning walk,
 Patient and patronizing, like a father
 Who laughs in secret, hearing his children talk. . . .

"Superbly moral beans! Self-righteous ones!
 One might suppose you were not beans, but suns!
 Wet from the earth, two minutes old, and we
 Presume to talk philosophy! . . .
 Yet, none the less,—naïvely upright beans,—
 I stand abashed before you! . . .
 Is it with your own voices that you speak? . . .
 It is strangely like a music I have heard—
 Not, as one would expect of you, a squeak
 Fainter than gossamer or cry of mote,
 But the original, vast, reverberant Word!
 Crashing of stars to dust, the crack of moons,
 Combustion of suns . . . is it not these I hear? . . .
 Or is it only the delicate slipping of sand-grains
 From the grotesque hands you rear? . . ."

Festus, blowing a cloud of smoke before him,
 Has a vision: the beans no longer seem
 Pale pygmies at his feet, but, dark and monstrous,
 Green titans labouring in a colossal dream
 With worlds upon their backs! Slowly they move,
 The firmament strains and groans, a mountain falls,
 They shake in ruins their everlasting walls . . .
 Out of the dark they came,
 To loosen torrents of water and rock and flame . . .

"But am I then," says Festus, "in a cavern
 From which I dare not grow—
 Into the universe which is myself? . . ."
 . . . The poplar whirls in the wind; the beans, before him,
 Climb the colossal and savage stairs of the sunlight,—
 Heartless and dreamless, cruel, superbly slow.

V

"The world grows dark," says Festus: "evening falls,
 And it is like the rising of grey walls.
 Down the cold battlements of the west, the sun
 Dolorously descends.
 The wind mourns over the stark and shattered trees.
 The deep day ends.

How like the sorrowing of my heart is this,
 This soft ascension of despair!
 The warm red memories of my heart go down
 In waves of mist. . . . Let the stars find the air!

Here by the gateway let me lean and dream
 Of the world that waits for me:
 Through the pierced battlements of the grey clouds gleam
 Delicate lights; the stars come out: I see
 Beyond the plain, beyond the hills, a golden city
 Dizzy with shaken light, and through the streets
 Petals are flung, and a festival roars and passes . . .
 Steeples rock with bells, a dull drum beats:
 And now to a delicate music the dancers come
 Hurling up to the night a fountain of roses,
 Whirling and laughing and burying under their petals
 The mournfully throbbing and stubborn drum . . .

O dancers! dancers of silver! dancers of rose! . . .
 Twinkling dancers who starlike tread that air! . . .
 Lighter than waves you laugh against those walls;
 How like the secret dreams of my heart you are
 That dance once more as the cold of evening falls.

. . . And now an emperor comes! and now an empress!

In a golden chariot drawn by five white stallions . . .
 And now the steel-blue spears wave thick as rain
 Of battalions and battalions!

. . . Am I an emperor? Is my word the law? . . .
 And now the gods of brass and silver pass
 Swaying and flashing, shaking their chaplets of roses,
 Cruel, gigantic! And an elephant with torches,
 Bearing an Egyptian god in a case of glass! . . .

Listen: a horn! . . . a violin! . . .
 Weaving together an air so golden thin
 It cuts the heart in two.

A girl leans out in the roar above the torches,
 Her hair is dark, she flings a camelia flower:
 Strange girl, I cry to you! . . .

Softer the horn sounds, fainter the violin,
 The street is quiet. She draws the shutters in,
 Her shadow silently whirls away.
 Now that the streets grow dark and cold and empty
 Who will stay,—who will stay
 To watch the grey soft-footed priests go by
 Lifting their white thin faces to the sky? . . .
 Or who will stay to watch one coffin pass,
 Under few stars, amid stale litter of petals,
 While one man rides behind it on an ass,—
 Looking neither to left nor right
 But staring before him into the eternal night? . . .”

The city dwindles . . . the clouds go crumbling down . . .
 The wind throbs harplike through old trees,
 Dark is the plain, and ancient; and to Festus,
 Leaning upon the ramparts of his world,
 The thought comes that tonight the world will freeze.

VI

And observing from old ramparts cold with time
 How the hunted stars together choring climb
 From cloud to cloud, like pilgrims,
 Dreamily, slowly ascending the long blue stairs of fate,—

Patient and pale, like those who, unresisting,
Go forth to death and close their eyes and wait,—

Festus dreams; he sees himself alone
Immense and dark on a pinnacle of the world,
Lying in starlight, hugely carved in stone.
Carved of rock is the pillow beneath his head,
Hewed in the black star-granite is his bed,
Solitary and vast his upturned face
Stares at the cloudless horror of space;
While sorrowfully about the bases of his mountain,
The pine-shagged headlands, vapour-furled,
He hears the desolate waves of death and time
Sadly withdrawn and once more sadly hurled.

“ . . . Ah! Festus, is this you—
This ancient crumbling basalt that in the moonlight
Feebly glistens with dew?
Is this indeed you, Festus,—
This unresisting stone
On which old leaves are blown? . . . ”

Yet not alone is Festus: in the blue vagueness there,
Close to the cold dew-drenched sarcophagus,
Crouched on the topmost stair,
A flute-player pale in the starlight blows his quavering flute
While Festus dreams above him, and is mute.
Sharp and quick are the notes, brief and piercing,
They whirl and fly in the dark like birds,
Discordant and strange they rise in the eternal silence
Like a madman's dishevelled laughter and words.
Over the black sarcophagus they are blown—
“ Ah, Festus, do they not trouble your ears of stone?
Through starlit granite do they not dart
To pierce your stone-cold heart?
Do they disturb the rest
Of the stone hands on your breast? . . . ”

But Festus does not stir
In the darkness of his sepulchre,—
A dream possesses him.

He hears, far down, the struggling crash of waves
By the bases of the mountain, glutting the muffled caves;
He hears the boulders falling to the grey torrents of the sea;
Wind flows over him mournfully,
Mists of the waves about him rise, the vermillion stars grow
dim . . .

And lightly between the hands of the flute-player
Whirl forth shy birds of dream,
They twinkle above the sepulchre,
Their wings in the starlight gleam . . .
And now soft fire descends from their wings,
And Festus' dream glares red:
Cloud-palaces and kingdoms dark
And multitudinous cities of rose
Within his dream are spread . . .
"The spears of your armies, Festus, on this plain,
Are as the glimmering darkness of the rain! . . .
Listen! They call you emperor! . . .
And a crown is on your head!"

Festus, never stirring at all,
Lying forever aloft and alone in the starlight,
Sadly replies from the carved stone at last:
"Who are you, now, you strange flute-player,
Who, blowing your birds above me here in the silence,
Dare to disturb my rest? . . .
Do you think, with dreams like these,
To tempt me down, or drown me in those seas?
Ah! it is the sevenfold lightning alone
Will wake this heart of stone . . ."

Then, in the shadow of the sepulchre,
The flute-player, growing old,
Blows one weak note from the broken flute;
And the lightning, sevenfold,
Smoking clangs from a star, and splits
The eternal rock apart:
And into the sea the mountain falls,
The great waves laugh, and among them falls
Hissing and faint, far down, soon lost,
The ember of a heart. . . .

. . . And Festus, leaning gravely above the ramparts,
Watching a blood-red star go down the sky,
Stands astonished. Was this indeed a dream?
Summits of snow await him far in the starlight:
Cities, beyond the snow-peaks, stir and gleam.

PART II

HE CLIMBS THE COLOSSAL AND SAVAGE STAIRS OF THE SUNLIGHT

I

"Beautiful darkener of hearts, weaver of silence,
Woman of the bitter desert and the bronze mountains,
Grim Sphinx brooding over the wind-flung dunes of time,—
Is it not enough that Festus brings you a kingdom?
Woman of the pale and sinister secret,
You who flash forth already laughing
From the tumultuous and cruel glare of jungles,
The black chasms of the sea,—
Will you demand yet more of me?
Desolate and heartless woman!
You who arise like a dry and savage wind
Withering the flesh, consuming cities:
You who above me in the night time
Tower, cold and blue as a caryatid,
Stone-like among the stars,—
Are the jewels and spoils of an empire not sufficient?
Are the notes of my flute not sweet to you?
Are my hands not yet dark enough with blood?

"Implacable sorceress,
Dancer among the black tombs of the Pharaohs!
Dancer among bats and serpents,
Whose cool shoulders are soft with cobwebs,
Whose eyes glow in the dusk like sepulchral jewels,
Whose hands are cruel;
You who glide like a priestess
Among the moist columns of moonlit roofless temples

On an errand of horror and secrecy;
Stealthy dancer amid leaves and green starlight,
Haunter of dead vineyards and houses defiled,
Laughter amid the grey wastes and waters of kingdoms,—
Is the anguish of my heart not enough for you?
Is the sorrow of my flesh not sufficient?
Must I destroy yet more for you,—
Even, at last, myself?

“Beautiful and pale-lipped visionary,
Votaress in the clear depths of whose dark eyes
Are the infinite silences of the skies
And the bursting and paling of stars;
You in whose smile are the flamings and fadings of suns,
In whose laughter are hidden the secrets of the past,
In whose ‘yes’ are the blue corridors of eternity
In whose ‘no’ flash the scarlet lightnings of death;
Look! my sword is red for you,
I have blown over empires the horns of desolation for you;
Towers have crashed into dust for you;
Men and women for you lie dead.

“Inscrutable enchantress,
Spinner of the everlasting blue-and-gold
Which takes captive the simplicities of the flesh;
You whose hand falls heavily on my heart,
You under whose smile I tremble and grow mighty,
You out of whose world-darkening shadow
I am weak and cannot rise to depart—
Tell me, since these offerings are insufficient,
These kingdoms not enough,
What more must I fling down the abysm of your hatred?
To what darkness and terror take my way?

“Listen! A sound of misery reaches your ears,
The lamentations of the dying,
The sound of the myriad homeless, wailing and crying
By glowing walls
In the smoky obscurity of the moon.
Listen again! The sound of singing,
And iron footsteps rhythmically ringing

In mountainous tread
Down the dark streets of the dying and the dead!
Drums beat, walls quiver,
My armies flow forever past me in the darkness,
Darkly glinting like a river;
They lap and curl in the torchlight by old walls;
Now here, now there, into the black swirling torrent
A loosened fragment falls.
And they bring home for you solemnly from strange lands
Vessels of gold and silver, coffers of brass,
Gods of vermillion and ivory encased in glass,
Birds in filigree cages,
Pale slave-women drooping in chains,
Prophets and priests and dancers and frightened sages,
Jewels that flash about you like tropic rains!
Musicians throb their strings for you
A singer from a far blue island sings for you;
Have I not yet brought you enough?

"Beautiful woman! golden woman whose heart is silence!
Azure pool of the eternal in which my soul bathes timidly!
Pity me, smile upon me, tell me the way
To the holy treasure which will unlock your love for me."

II

"It is night-time," Festus says, "and in the night-time
All my dark dreams return, sadly reproach me
With unfulfilments. . . . Why is it, old man of the rain,
That here,—as I toss and cannot sleep in the darkness
Under this lofty canopy of dusky azure
Which I have caused to be illuminated with silver planets,—
You return to me again?
Truly we have come far, no longer in outer darkness
Do we stoop and plant our beans in the wind and the rain!"

. . . Fragrance of lotus-flowers and sandalwood
Wavers and faints in the coolness of the room,
The great fountain, outside, crashes on a pavement of gold,
Trees plunge heavily in the thin starlight
Shaking slow cries from somnolent nightingales,

Wind hums over the palace walls,
The fountain perpetually falls . . .
And the eyes of the old man rest on those of Festus,—
Or is it a dream?—and Festus sharply recalls

The ancient furrows of earth, gleaming with rain,
Grey clouds sweeping the trees, the rain-dark plain,
Rain-drops rushing amid the grass,
And the coldness and the loneliness of clouds and winds;—
And he sees once more the old man pass
Troubled and grey into the greyness and the pain
Of the harsh-arrowed rain.

“ . . . Ah, Festus, do not forget
It is but a little way we have travelled yet
From the wretched darkness of that time!
Shall we take forever our ease amid silks and music
Or,—up this colossal stairway,—shall we climb? . . . ”

The words are softly murmured, the words die,
They are lost in the perpetual crash of the great fountain
On its pavement of gold,
The stars seem to be tossed on the leaves of trees.
And in the returning silence it seems to Festus
This ancient figure is but himself grown old,—
Grown old in misery and futility and loneliness,
Grown old in darkness and wretchedness,
Solitary and far in a wind-worn plain,
Planting his beans forever in the wind and the rain.

III

“ . . . Now that the kings are conquered, west and east,”
Says Festus, “let the dark world learn my name:
Carve it on walls! cut deeply every stone
With ‘Festus!’ . . . till the stones beneath men’s feet,
No matter where they go, to what dark borders,
Shrill ‘Festus! Festus! Festus!’ I would have
The leaves of trees cry ‘Festus’ in the wind,
The tongues of birds be slit that they may sing it,
The grass itself be rooted up and burned

If it be foolish and not learn to spell!
Let cities bear my name. In every province,
See that the capital be named for Festus:
The swordsman of the stars, enslaver of kings.
Do men have gods? . . . In the dark corners yet
Do men raise images of stone or brass,
Beat drums before them, weep in the dust before them,
Shed blood of goats? . . . Shatter these gods with hammers!
Slay those who worship them! For there shall be
But one god henceforth, and his name is Festus.
Set images of Festus in all shrines.
Hang lamps before them; and burn frankincense
For fragrance. Let the priests, if they desire it,
Make living sacrifices,—men and maidens,
Should they be beautiful,—for festivals . . .
It will be laughable in the streets to hear
The priests go singing ‘Festus!’ . . .

“There have been,

You tell me, kings before me who were great.
This one, you say, had men remove a mountain,
And where the mountain was he built a palace . . .
But this was nothing. Look! my slaves, like ants,
Assembling each his atomy grain from nowhere,
Swarm and disperse, and swarm again, and slowly,
Bleeding and dying (in thousands—and for me!)
Raise the dead mountain once more to the sky.
And look! how now a palace, all of glass,
Glistens upon it! Within it move musicians,
You see far off their rose and purple garments,
Their silver instruments; from room to room,
You see them gliding among walls of glass
Like blue and scarlet fish. How sweet their music!
Tinkling and waved, like music from the sea . . .
All music, truly,—now that we talk of music,—
Seems to be but a kind of praise of Festus.
. . . And this king, too (my noble predecessor!—),
Watched gladiators fight with nets and swords;
Laughed when he saw faint virgins flung to lions;
Taking a sort of pleasure, as you’ll say,
In seeing the claws rip down the flower-like breasts,

Streak the poor flanks with red. . . . But bloodshed bores
me . . .

Let the gross mind love elephants in torchlight
Trampling the plashy flesh, or tossing entrails
Under the moon! For me, more subtle pleasures. . . .

Here for example on a marble table

You have a princess from an eastern province,
Most delicately reared; and here are surgeons.
We bind her down with silken thongs, well-coloured,
Lest, moved too much by the flattery of the knives,
Too modest under the shrewdness of such tongues,
She'll writhe and spoil our play. . . . For what's our purpose
But to explore this passion men call life
To the red and smoky end? to tear aside
Curtain on steamy curtain of red fibre
In hot pursuit of—what but life or death?

"Well—then—the first incision. . . . Have it slow . . .

We sit in a ring about her, robed in white.
Hangings of gold and purple wave on the air
Along the walls: in golden bowls float roses,
Flowering vines blow in through the open window,
And there, outside, by the wall beneath the window,
We have musicians, young men, six or seven,
Strumming a silver accompaniment of strings.
Sweet is the morning! Sweet, too, is the season!
Judas blossoms melt in a sky of azure,
Float on an azure pool with scarce a ripple,
Or, fallen in dust, are fanned by wings of bees. . . .
Princess, is there a lover awaits you somewhere,—
Comes in the moonlight, putting up his hands
Against a small-leaved bough to press it backward
Or break its fragrance? Stands in the blue-dark shadow
Close to a fountain, watching how it huddles
Its amethysts in the moonlight on wet marble,—
Repeating to himself in a foolish wonder
Your trifling vast eternal world-swung name?
You've heard him praise you, maybe, heard the music
Incredible with which his voice embalms you,
Saying his rituals of eyes and eyebrows,
Lips, hair, and tortured hands, the throat like honey,

The voice like—what? . . . But where's his praise to ours,—
His love to our love? Pale and faint externals!
While we, with steel-blue tongues, in sweet persistence
Press in from outwards, make our slow incision,
Dissect, as it were, the cry of pain itself . . .
We have our rituals no less than he.
Is this the golden eyebrow we have loved?
Let us discover if its roots are gold,
That they be also praised; and this sweet pulse
Shaking its music through its world of flesh,
The whole white tingling length, in bells of crimson,—
Making the small soft wrist so sweetly tremble,
Carrying into the brain's enchanted forest
Its elfin far-off murmur of horns and cymbals,
Sweet hint, amid that jungle dark and savage,
Of laughing girls and youths forever singing,—
Shall we explore it to its secret source,
To some black smoking pool? . . . The surgeons bend
Intently to their work, shadows of clouds
Darken the room, darken the leaning faces,
The rose-bowl's butterfly of reflected brilliance
Pales on the ceiling, and you, too, gentle princess,
Grow pale, grow paler still, but in the shadow
Of clouds how more gigantic! Your white mouth
No longer utters cries, your golden head
No longer turns from side to side, your eyes,
Immense and dark with pain, amazed and silent,
No longer search our faces for an answer
To riddles black as these! You only hear
A great wind roaring among stars and ruins,
Walls falling, planets blowing, the eternal wind
Of death and change poured harshly through this chaos,
Stifling our little lamps. . . . Ah, princess, princess,
Dancer, laughter, singer, daughter of kings,
Inheritor of the earth! what now avail you
The beauty of flesh that shook our hearts, the dream
Which, dreamed in secret, seemed to you to change
This now too human flesh of yours to fire
Of self-consuming star in ether kindled! . . .
Where are the mirrors gone that sang your praise!
Where are the human hearts that danced like motes

In the sunshafts of your brilliance! Where the jewels
 That worn by you burned down to a little dust!
 Did we that loved you love but blood and sinew,
 This flesh from bleeding flesh uprisen, this mortal
 And so ephemeral jot in immortal time?
 Look! your hands, which lovers desired to kiss,
 Are bone and flesh, your eyes are jewels of water,
 Your crimson pulse lies waste. . . . The steel-blue tongues
 Babble in blood, cry out in a chaos of silence,
 Call you in vain! . . . Our love, then,—is it wasted?
 Do we like darkling troubadours come too late
 And foolishly sing in the moonlight under a window
 Whence she we praise is gone? . . .

“We have no answer.

The thing we seek escapes us, as forever.
 Let the musicians take their music elsewhere,
 Play to the poor, the sick,—not to ourselves
 Who find our power futile, and make of it
 A cruelty. . . . I am well named indeed.”

IV

Festus, in a balcony lined with silk,
 Whose colours flutter and flash in the noonday sun,
 Watches his crowds flow past him in the street . . .
 The awning above him casts a rose-tinged shade
 On the veined marble of the balustrade:
 He shuts his eyes, and the rhythms of the feet
 Countless, incessant, conflicting and interwreathing,
 Pound at the sky, are silent, beat and beat . . .
 Look how these atoms swarm beneath blue skies!
 The stones wear down beneath his very eyes . . .
 The walls are slowly and softly abraded,
 The colours are faded,
 The city sinks smoothly away
 To dust and clay. . . .

Festus, chin upon palm, observes these faces
 That swarm in the glare of noon from secret places.
 Quickly they come and greedily go

To the dark-doored corners of the world they know.
Sorrow has carved them all:
They dare not lift their eyes from street or wall.

"You, now," says Festus, "you, whose eyes are young
And blue as the skies in which small clouds dissolve,—
You, barefooted, who run with an armful of flowers,
Morning-glory and trumpet-vine,—
What would you say to a life like mine? . . .
Music to send you to sleep, music to wake you,
Music by day and by night to chime your hours,
Dancers to dance for you, and a chariot to take you
To gather your flowers! . . .

"Walls and roofs of crystal wherethrough in the night
You watch the moon and stars dance slowly by,—
Lying alone in an ocean of starry light
Under the sky!
What should your couch be, truly, but chryselephantine?
And a purple-beaked parrot to perch on your hand:
And,—in the noon,—a gorgeous palanquin
To await your command.

"Where shall it be? To the blue Moon Gardens—?
To hear in the fragrance of shade
A chorus of nightingales sing, in a darkness of vines,
Of a moon-silenced glade? . . .
Kings shall go with you, and roses fall whitely about you,
Queens from the east spill your salvers of fruit,
Horns flare before you; and the loveliest prince of them all,
With a ghost of a lute,

"Sing you how exquisite now are your lips and your eyebrows,
Your hands, the strange depths of your hair,—
You, whose terrible beauty, like a plague, like a curse,
A violence of air,
Blow out,—ah, poor little candles!—our empires and kingdoms,
Send walls roaring down,
And leave the huge world in a clamour of horrible darkness,
King babbling with clown! . . .

"Ah—you are frightened! You ask for no chariot of silver,—
No mantles embroidered with moons;
There are tears in your eyes! I will give you a penny—instead!—
Keep your mornings, your noons,
Wild grass for your feet, blue heavens as young as your eyes,
Your arms full of flowers!
You have your glories. And as for ourselves—well, who knows?
Perhaps we have ours."

V

Festus, under a sun that burns like brass,
Leans from the wall to watch a coffin pass.
Was it preceded by a human cry,—
By one cracked trumpet-note? . . .
A sound of grief shakes faintly against the sky,—
Seems, even yet, like a ghost, to float
In the glare of the sun. . . . And Festus is vaguely afraid,
And sets his goblet down on the balustrade.
Stirring upon it, the silver shapes grow dim,
Dilate and wreath and swim.

. . . Yet there is nothing here that strains belief . . .
"Is it so strange,"—says Festus,—
"in the sunlight,
To see a coffin,—to hear a cry of grief? . . ."
The coffin sways and passes
Shaking slow waves of brilliance from polished glasses.
The sound of the hooves is scarcely heard.
How is it?—The street grows suddenly empty,
Across it whirls the shadow of a flying bird.
Festus leans in the sunlight from his wall:
The coffin is gone. No footstep comes at all.

And Festus smiles and lifts his goblet up
Under the profound blue silence of the sky
And he observes the sun, which in his cup
Swims like a small red eye,
And tilts it toward his lips, secretly laughing
To see that he should be quaffing
The sun in a cup of wine. . . . But the sun escapes,
And faintly again—between the walls of the houses—

Ascends a human cry,
And a cracked trumpet-note, brief and shrill:
And the same coffin—or is it another?—passes again,
And again the street is still.

Yet there is nothing here that strains belief. . . .
Is it so odd
To see a coffin—to hear a cry of grief? . . .
The coffin sways and passes,
Shaking slow waves of brilliance from polished glasses. . . .
And Festus, setting his goblet wearily down
Amid the sunlit walls of the silent town,
Perceives, as in a dream,
How, one by one, the unmoving houses seem,
Under the profound blue silence of the sky,
Divulging silently,
Each, through soundless doors, its confined dead. . . .
The coffins pass, the trumpets crack and cry,
Black birds darken the sky;
The coffins wait beneath the swinging trees,
Graves are opened, the leaves fall:
And Festus, leaning heavily from his wall,
Goblet in hand, with the scarlet sun overhead,
Observes with horror, observes with astonishment,
That this dark world he rules is a world of coffins;
The city he rules is a city of the listless dead. . . .

And sharply and sorrowfully he turns away
From the sound of hooves and wheels,
The crying of trumpets, the failing of voices;
But the last coffin approaches; the last cry of grief,
Shaken and brief,
Wavers amid grey walls; and the city is darkened;
And Festus watches the last slow coffin pass
While one man rides behind it on an ass—
Looking neither to left nor right,
Staring before him into the infinite.
Is it the old man of the rain?
Festus cries to him: but his cry descends
Into the silence as a stone falls into the sea,

And the coffin is gone, and the vision ends . . .
 And Festus, wondering, lifts his goblet again,

And perceives in the streets the people coming and going,
 The flashing of eyes and hands, the hurry of feet,
 The laughter of living voices. . . . And over it all
 The sun whirls down its brazen clangour of heat;
 The cymbals of heat clang down on roof and wall.

PART III

HE ENTERS THE FOREST OF DEPARTED GODS

I

"In this forest," says Festus, "this old and savage forest,
 Among these trees
 Which have performed, one knows, such cruelties,—
 Where cruelties are even now performed—;
 In the silence of this forest, which conceals
 Temples and tombs; among these gleams and glooms;
 Where, amid the windy shiftings of these trees,
 One sees in the dark for a moment a temple glisten;
 Where, if one will listen
 To the wind's long leafy swell
 One hears the rustled stirring of a bell:
 A small bell faintly clinked,
 Sleepy and indistinct:
 Or a deep bell which the winds forlornly toll;
 Is it as some say true—Old man of the rain!—
 That here the gods still dwell,—
 That here in the shadowy noons they walk again,
 That here the body may meet an unbodied soul? . . ."

(. . . The trees are still, the trees make hardly a sound,
 The trees let fall old leaves in silence,
 The old leaves touch, with a sigh, the ground.)

"In this forest," says Festus, "this forest of eternal life and death,
 This forest in which the pools are fertile,
 This forest of blind roots and furtive breath—

Is it as some say true
 That if I touch with my hands an oak or yew,
 Or break a willow bough,
 Among these leaves Confucius will come forward
 In a robe of saffron silk, and stand
 With one uplifted hand,
 And say to me, 'Be tranquil, stare at death,
 Live as the grass lives, uncomplaining,
 Be grateful for the sun.' . . . Or among these trees
 Shall I indeed hear the clear voice of the Buddha,
 And see him, smiling, sit with folded knees
 On the great lotos: and hear him say:
 'Look through the little whirlings of night and day,
 The dark brief flight of clouds and rain,
 The red transparencies of pleasure and pain,—
 To the white perfection of the infinite . . .'
 Or find that other, Jesus of Nazareth,
 Under a pear-tree, eating of the fruit,
 And hear him say, 'Heed not the absolute,
 Love what is little, turn not your thoughts above
 So much as here and round you,—mostly, love!' . . .?"

(. . . The many trees, on the unseen waves of the air,
 Rise slowly, turn, or slowly come to pause.
 The leaves are laced together and parted again,
 The small bell tinkles, the deep bell tolls,
 A flurry of rain on the leaves makes a sound of applause . . .)

"And what shall I say to—Jesus of Nazareth?
 Or, to Confucius, what shall I reply,—
 Or what to Buddha? . . . Shall I indeed say, 'It is I,
 I, who carry the world like a bird in a cage,
 I, for whom the world sings morning and evening?'
 Shall I say: 'How then shall I think you god or sage—
 You who would have me live as the grass; or love it;
 Or you who would have me lift clear eyes above it
 To the silent ecstasy of life in death?' "

(. . . The trees of the forest are calm and stolid about him:
 It is as if they eyed this man askance.

They stir a little, suspicious, not knowing his purpose;
And the irresponsible and capricious leaves
Catch at the ghost of an air and flash and dance.)

II

In the midst of a pool of sunlight, in the silence of the forest,
Festus sits on a stone:
The silence breaks in slow green waves about him.
He is alone.

"Look now, Confucius! . . . Jesus of Nazareth! . . .
Buddha, whose heart is an eternally opening flower—! . . .
Look at the world of men I have left behind me
To seek you amid the mysteries of this forest. . . .
What will you give me in place of this—what power,
What majesty, what secret dark dominion,
What lucid understanding of life and death?
What knowledges—Confucius, Jesus, Buddha—
What knowledges of grain and star have you?
Can you at will wear divers shapes and bodies:
Do I in error imagine you as trees
Opening rosy blossoms, or letting fall
Your glossy petals on a wall;

Can you at will let fall your hearts as dew
Among these leaves for the delight of a bee or a bird;
Can you indeed be silence, only; or in the twilight,
When the forest closes on its memories,
Let yourselves be heard
As whisper, only, or rustle, or creak, or sigh,
The shrinking of a leaf that is old and dry,
The snap of a dark root, underground,—
Can you, indeed, embody your souls as sound? . . ."

(A parrot swings on the bough of a mulberry tree,
Regarding Festus listlessly.
A mulberry leaf detaches itself, and falls,
Silently pirouetting through a pool of sunlight;
And the quiet above him builds itself green walls.)

"This silence now—this bird with crimson feathers—
 Is it with these you speak to me?
 Confucius, are you indeed this mulberry tree
 Extending cold and green in a void of silence,
 Bearing a crimson bird, or slowly and softly
 Letting a single leaf fall, carefully?
 Or if indeed these leaves were once your flesh;
 Or if from among these leaves at a certain moment
 In the eternal and golden recurrence of time
 With a leafy rustle and chime
 You step once more, having no other speech
 Than sings from a choir of leaves in wind or rain,—
 What, in the silence then, shall I hear you teach?
 What syllables will fall, as this leaf falls,
 Which shall remove forever death and pain?"

The mulberry tree makes no reply;
 Placid and solitary beneath the sky,
 Seeming to dream no dream of leaf or bird,
 It sways in the pool of sunlight; and beneath it
 The words of Festus fall and are not heard.

III

"Nevertheless," says Festus, "I await you:
 In this silence I will wait . . .
 In the darkness, in the greenly filtered starlight,
 I will seek among white-blossomed boughs a gate,
 I will find your old and secret ruin of temple,
 With its bell that makes no sound:
 I will touch it with cool hands, and tear away
 The jasmine flowers that wrap it round.
 Will it not ring? . . . Will it not cry aloud
 From the immortal hearts of three great gods
 To star and moon and the passing cloud? . . .
 Will you not then come forward, like three children,
 Performing miracles? Will you not say:
 'This is he who gave his world away
 For the knowledges that make a man immortal—
 Let us light for him the portal
 That will lead him out of time and space forever. . . .'?

Will you not touch my eyes with hands like silver,
Spread a net of music round me,
Pierce me, break me, and confound me
In a dazzling light of sound, in a tumult as of light?
Shall I pass beyond the walls of day and night? . . .

“Yet it is strange you say no word, nor manifest
Your hiding-places.
No wind there is, yet the treetops do not rest.
From gloom to gloom I seek your faces,
Bringing my world to give you like a jewel. . . .
Ah, Jesus, Buddha, grey Confucius,
Is it as some say true
That I shall have no comfort out of you?
And is this forest but illusion
In which old ghosts of sound make soft confusion?”

IV

The evening darkens: how insubstantial now
Whirls the black forest of departed gods!
Less than the glimmering blossom on this bough
Which the dead moon so wanly kindles;
Fallen with less sound than a cup of petals
On cobweb rent with dew;
Less real than these,
So now, so now, this old illusion dwindles;
I am alone, then, in this forest:
I walk alone amid these trees.
Confucius has not strength to lift a pebble,
Buddha, who is but vapour, casts no shadow,
Jesus is silent, under a stone. . . .
Revere the moon, then, Festus, who, though dead,
Reveals this emptiness! Revere the moon.

Cool is the evening, cooler in the mind,
Where the dew falls among more phantom forests
On flowers ghostly and on hands unreal.
This is the forest where abide the gods,
This is the emptiness your moons reveal.
Be silent, Festus, here amid these trees

Which are yourself: be silent, dream among them,
 Become a ghost yourself, in a world of ghosts;
 Give yourself gods! Or if the gods obey not—

The gods obey not. And among these trees
 I will discourse with Mephistopheles. . . .

. . . Come with a clap of thunder! Shed bright fire
 On oak and smoking maple! Split a rock
 Or draw a molten cedar round about you!
 Be horned with gold, wear diamonds on your brow,
 Tailed like a serpent, star-tipped at the point:
 Let every footstep be a tuft of smoke
 In the anguished grass! . . . Or else, have none of these.
 Be, as your master is, most sorrowful,
 Count beads, say prayers, shed tears.

Look, where his ghost shines pale among the trees!
 I will discourse with Mephistopheles. . . .

Be not so fugitive! disclose your powers,
 Show me what evil, in this world of evil,
 Turns to a profit with a wave of the wand!
 Tear open, with your silver-taloned hand,
 The hearts of women; feed me on slow laughter,
 Pluck richest music from poor strings of flesh!
 Show yourself nimble—come and go like an actor
 In garbs fantastic, wear a woman's body,
 To dance before me naked and cold in sunlight:
 Bring moonlight, teach me to love in such a fashion
 I shall not surfeit of you, nor, being refused,
 Beat out my love in sorrow! . . . But can this be
 That Mephistopheles whom I have honoured?
 Singular, he should look so like to me!

(. . . It is a woman's body shines before me:
 It is a flake of the moon:
 It is the intensity of my desire! . . .)

How lightly the wind blows you through this darkness!
 How smoothly wrought, how curious is your body!

How colder than a sea-shell is your flesh!
And look: there are silver cobwebs woven about you,
Webs to be brushed away, to be breathed upon and broken.
Fine webs about your breast, cool webs about your heart!
You are among these trees which are myself;
You move beneath my thousand branches;
Pass slowly, meditate, retrace your steps,
Yet not too slowly pass,
Nor yet with too few footsteps touch this grass! . . .
I am about you as the darkness is:
Softly within me, ghost of light,
Turn and turn, amaze me with your beauty;
Be in me as the firefly in the night!

(. . . It is a woman's body shines before me:
Not an illusion, not Mephistopheles,
Not the intensity of my desire!
It is not the light of my heart among these trees,—
The light I cast before me and foolishly follow:
It is a woman's body . . . but what if, none of these,
It is not flesh, or beauty in flesh, or the desire for gods,
But the god himself, an ancient satyr,
Burning his heart in a tissue of sorceries? . . .)

Who was it gave you eyes so unlike mine?
Who was it took the huge sky filled with stars,
Twilight of time, twilight of infinity
Delicately conscious of the finite beauty of stars,
And gave it to you for darkness in your eyes?
See how the mandolin tinkle of my praise
Wavers and is extinguished, goes but so little, faintly,
Amid such midnight silence! Is it indeed
You, who move like a wandering lantern, going
In the conscious all-enfolding night of me—
Deeply within me glimmering, faintly revolving;
Or is it rather myself who drop old praises
Into an emptiness and darkness so profound?
Touch me, talk to me, cleave to me, turn about me,
Show me in all ways the amazement of your beauty,
Gleam, burn, pale before me, laughingly afflict me,
Tear with your hands at the honey that's hid in my heart!

I will submit to you, if you wish submission,
 Or tower above you like terror, if terror you wish;
 Be as the grass before you, or the forest above you. . . .
 We are together and the great world is our shadow.
 Who brought us here? Who found your heart in fire? . . .

(Clouds flew up to the zenith, glide under the stars,
 Seem curling coldly about them, are lit by the moon,—
 Twice, thrice,—then shred on the air and die.
 These are the centuries: I am old as granite:
 I have been standing beneath these stars forever,
 Forest grown upon forest, hill huddled on hill.
 Star-dust has darkened my heart . . . snow-song . . . bird
 song . . .

How many aeons returning have whispered and thrilled me!
 Rocks, how many, have crashed into dust beneath me!
 Lovers, how many, have loved me and blown on the wind!)

You are the full cold cloud-dividing beauty
 Of the August moon:
 The moon in the warm blue-violet depths
 Between snow cliffs of cloud:
 The death-wind that shakes down a shower of stars
 From the green tree of heaven.
 I am the clouds that endeavour to close about you;
 The stars that cling to the tree of heaven,
 And, falling through you, are blest. . . .
 What is your name? Why have I sought you
 As Jesus, Confucius, Buddha?
 Or why,—among the memories of these trees,—
 Did I perceive you as Mephistopheles? . . .
 How simple and terrible are the words you use!
 Your 'yes' what is it but 'forever,'—
 The white tide of suns roaring down space on space
 Through the everlasting sonorous blue canyon of time?
 Your 'no' what is it but 'death,'
 The sky of black basalt that crushes one soul?
 Your 'beauty'—what tempests of music assail me!
 What silence—stars in the spring! . . .
 . . . I walk by a violet river paved with stars,
 The music of earth about me moving softly

From stone to dust, from dust to tree.
 I stand on a purple mountain at the daybreak
 And watch a cloud procession, far below me,
 Leisurely crossing a twilight sea.
 Forests ascend about me and are fallen,
 Stars are quenched in the rains of time:
 Slowly the gods, in azure mantles of dream,
 Leave behind them the hills that immortally gleam,
 Descend with sorrowful footsteps. Slowly climb
 The younger gods with sadness in their eyes
 To hills less noble and to darker skies. . . .
 I walk by a purple river brimmed with stars,
 Sad with the sadness of incomprehensible beauty,
 Hearing in turn the voices of all things, lifting
 Their patient questions. . . . Valleys, how lovely are they,
 One slope green with meadows, sun-enkindled,
 One slope black with shadow, stark with boulders,
 Tawny with sands, twinkling with streams! . . .
 Sorrowful is my heart when I remember beauty,
 It is with sorrow that I hear you dancing,—
 Beautiful dancer on air and fire!—
 In the old grey house of my heart:
 I am the dust on which a rose has fallen,
 The stone on which vain starlight falls;
 How sadly unworthy of you are these grey cloisters,
 These cobwebbed walls! . . .

(It is not a woman's body shining before me—
 Not a flake of the moon—
 Not the intensity of my desire! . . .

The darkness seems to freeze
 In the immobile shapes of trees . . .

It is not Buddha, it is not Confucius,
 Jesus, or Mephistopheles;
 Not a dream, less than the dream of a dream . . .
 It is myself alone,—
 Touching with hands a world of ancient stone;
 Summoning gods from it,—how fugitive and vain!—
 Summoning gods to walk on the delicate shine of air,

Weaving out of the rock a gossamer
 Vast as the world is, that therein might fall
 A dew of stars! . . . Ah, Festus, Festus, Festus,
 How always about you, greater than the world you dream of,
 Kises immortally beyond you your own self's wall!)

V

Solitary, before daybreak, in a garden
 Dark amid the unchanging snow,
 Watching the last star fading in a fountain
 Whence melodies of eternal water flow,

Festus, seeing the sky-line burn and brighten
 Coldly, far above the hidden sun;
 Seeing the golden thread of glory unravelled
 Along the wall of mountains run,

Hears in his heart a cry of bewilderment;
 And turning, now here, now there,—
 Like one who pauses a moment before departure,—
 Partakes of the grace of earth and air,

Drinks of the vast blue splendour of the sky,
 The mile on mile of dew-blanchèd grass,
 The cloud-swept trees, the stones, bare cliffs of bronze;
 And in the pool, as in a glass,

Ringed round with nodding asters, frosted leaf-tips,
 Stoops to see his image . . . and behold,
 How faded is the scarlet of his mantle!
 His face, how changed and old! . . .

.

Sing now the birds: on every bough a bird sings;
 Slowly at first, then fast and faster,
 Till the walled garden thrills and shrills with music:
 The cricket beneath the violet aster

Cries his joy to heaven as the first beam strikes him—
 The foxgloves bend beneath a weight of bees;

Praise! praise! praise! the chorus rises;
Drowsily, happily, dumbly, sway the trees.

Fades the star in the fountain: and the sun comes.
How motionless stands Festus there!
A red leaf, falling slowly to meet a red leaf
That rises out of the infinite to the air,

Floats, is turned by the wind about his image . . .
Ah, Festus, is this you,
This ruin of man about whom leaves fall coldly
And asters nod their dew? . . .

Pale, phantasmal, swirls the forest of birches,
It is a dance of witch-girls white and slim;
Delicately flash their slender hands in the sunlight!
Cymbals hiss, their eyes are dim

Under the mist of hair they toss above them . . .
But Festus, turning never,
Heeding them not, nor the birds, nor the cricket shrilling,
Stares at the pool forever,

Seeking in vain to find,—somewhere, somewhere!—
In the pool, himself, the sky?—
The slight clear beautiful secret of these marvels,
Of birch, birds, cricket's cry,

Blue sky, blue pool, the red leaf falling and floating,
The wall of mountains, the garden, the snow,
And one old man—how sinister and bedraggled!—
Cawing there like a crow. . . .

Instant the miracle is! He leans bewildered
Over the infinite, to search it through. . . .
Loud sing the birds! on every bough a bird sings,
The cricket shrills, the day is blue.

PART IV

HE STRUGGLES IN THE NET OF HIMSELF

I

The silver flails of the rain
Thresh heavily, heavily on the floor of my heart;
The silver flails of the rain
Waver and crash over the desolate floor,
Coldly in the morning, in the evening slowly,
Separating sorrow for me from the miserable grain.
Is it kingdoms I lift up in my hands,
The purple cities of twilight, jewels of many lands,
Domes, courts, palaces, walls inlaid with gold?
Dust they are, as dust I let them fall,
Dust on the grass-blade are they all.
And you, Old Man of the Rain—
You whom at last I know
Are but myself grown old,
Old without glory or triumph or understanding—
Old without love, old without pity,—
Come! come upward out of the shadows of my heart,
You who have been my guardian angel,
Point before me once more to some new city,
Some yet more gorgeous kingdom of the east
For me to feed my heart on like a beast!
Point before me once more to some new god
The pathway to whose temple is not trod
Daily by blood-stained millions! Some new god
Who moves not merely to a sound of bells,
The sound of the pulse itself, the murmur of flesh
Heard in the strain of silence. . . . Some new god
Who cries not captive in the glittering mesh
Woven out of the senses by the brain
Which beats against its world of flesh-in-pain!
I will not have a god who is myself! . . .
Yet it is not a new god I desire—
It is an old god, old as water and fire;
The ancient god whose secret is creation;
Or wisdom or an infinite contemplation. . . .

But you are silent, bringing only to my mind
Visions of the bright-dark sorrowful world I find
Unrolled before me,—sky beyond wave of sky;
Suns, stars, moons, swung on their chains of fire;
Light-bearing winds, spaces prepared for darkness,
The horror and crash and chaos, the gorgeous planets
Burned down like candles; and the infinitesimal earth,
Falling to dust with its little crying of kings;
And the little minds of men that dream these things . . .
See how the cities flame in the abyss of night,
With shouts, with cymbals, with a corybantic delight,
Flinging their roses against the moon!
See Rome—that was the carnival of the world—
Melting away like a desert snow!
Let walls be hammered of brass, yet wind will blow.
And over all these things I have passed my hands,
Brooding upon them: I have lifted men and kingdoms,
And let them fall. . . . Dreams, gods, visions, demons,
The strange dark music of the heart and brain
To which man marches, on his road to pain,—
All these I have sifted, I have sifted them like sands,
I have searched in vain for the secret of them all
And sadly I let them fall.

And you—Old Man of the Rain!
You, my deceiver, my ineludible daemon!
Haunter of shadows, whom always in the silence
Of the vacant world I hear
Blowing your feeble tunes on a rusted flute—
Blow one more melody, before you at last grow mute—
The one sharp lyric thing,—
Three notes or four,—
The arrow of music with the flame-like wing,—
Which will at last make nothing of earth and sky,
Swerve to the heart of things, that there in the darkness
The eternal god will wake from his sleep with a cry.

II

I will not have a god who is myself! . . .
But the million voices of the grass

Cry out upon me as I pass . . .
I will not have a god who is myself!
But the blue dome of basalt, ice-embossed,
Carved with hieroglyphs of frost,
Accuses me.
The clouds whip downward, the sudden rain
Beating against me with ghostly hands,
Shrills a chorus of hate for me.
Green hills, the far blue wavering plain,
Close in upon me, menace me,
The brown brook shatters against my brain . . .
Frightened, I ask the white birch tree
That shakes its cymbals in the sun,
'Is it true that an old god walks in me?' . . .
And the birch, not pausing in its race
With sun and cloud and river of fire,
Tosses backward a golden tress
From the half-seen hurrying witch-like face—
And answers—'Yes!'

Terror! I rise, I hurry away
And about me wheels the encircling day . . .
A shadow pursues me, long and thin,
The low grass weeps and clings to me,
The birch-trees whirl with a cymbal din.
The juniper holds my knee.
The pebble I lift in the palm of my hand
Laments, 'Lo, you are the one who planned
This world of horror, this world of grief!
Of frost and screaming leaf!'

Silent, upon a hill I lie
And take to my heart the horror of sky . . .
And about me shout ten million voices:
'Lo! how the obscene god rejoices
There, alone, in his infamy!
And ah, how thrice accursed is he
Who drew us into this web of pain;
And ah, how thrice-blest would he be
Should he destroy again!
Let rocks curl upward in a slow vapour

And trees, like clouds, dislimn in air,
Into the dark brain of the shaper
Let clouds like wandering dreams repair,
And seas,—become oh less than a sparkling
Drift or spray,—coil inward darkling,
And streams turn backward from the plain
Into the nothing of his brain . . .
Birds, from the tyranny of song
O be released, at last be still!
Rise like a spindrift, ancient hill,
And sands that have wept so long!

Alone on an angry hill I lie
And take to my heart the horror of sky—
And the tortured world, in mutiny,
Curses me for my infamy.
The cloud strikes at me with its shadow,
Beats my face with its ragged wings:
A snare of darkness is in the meadow:
The wind coils round my thigh, and stings.
Trees, with javelins of leaf,
Strike me out of their wrath and grief.
Darkly, between them, sky and hill
Struggle to crush me out and kill. . . .

I will not have a god in me! . . .
I flee in panic, I dart to escape
This world of horror that flees with me—
This world that takes its horror of shape
From my own brain's poor cruelty.
I flee in terror—: O Festus, find
Some doorway out of the mind!

III

Yet, birch-tree, dancing in the sun,
I am the grass you dance upon!
I am the wind that calls you out,
O swift of foot, with a cymbal-shout:
O hate not me! I give to you
Meadows of daisies dim with dew,

Birds to people your cloud of dream
With daybreak songs that drowse and gleam,
Blue cowl of night, and the star-peaked air
To hood the enchantment of your hair:
I am your lover—oh hate not me,
Beautiful witch-like dancing tree!

And you, old basalt, hoar with rime,
Dogged brooder on doom and time
And the stars that clock your firmament—
Less than the spider who wheels his tent
For one June day in the powdery crack
That winters have riven across your back—
Tinier, weaker, less than he,
Am I, who adore you: hate not me!

Look—I will dream the world anew
A world more beautifully wrought for you! . . .
White birch-trees on the clouds shall grow
And over the earth on the four winds blow,—
Nod to the stars; rustle at the sun;
Shine like candles, when the day is done,
Before the immortal altar of sky
And the sun's broad blazing half-closed eye. . . .
Festus—look!—on a hilltop stands
How small! how hidden! and lifts weak hands
To the holy birches, like candles seven,
That burn on the crystalline wall of heaven . . .
Seven white birch-trees all on fire,
And birds in the flame-boughs twitter and choir!
Stars in the branches, the birds sing loud,
Roots like lightning shot through a cloud,
And the cloud on a twilight sea, cold green,
Sailing like the ship of a phantom queen. . . .
Shafts of the mild light everywhere
Oar through the ocean of twilight air;
And now in the dusk falls a ghostly jingling
Of delicate bells on the birch-trees tingling,
And oh how sweetly is the fine air shaken!
The sleeping bells on the earth awaken,
There's a cry from a tower, a trill from a steeple,

A boom from a dome, the air begins to people
 With a hurrying, shimmering, flashing of wings,—
 Angels and demons: the whole sky sings . . .

Festus dreams: and the dead worlds change,
 They glow, they shiver, they are glittering and strange . . .
 Look, how a vine, all of silver interwoven,
 Falls from the moon! the silver moon is cloven,
 A ladder-way of roses shines down the sky,
 The moon and the earth are bound to it and cry.
 The sun turns a rose: its petals are the light:
 Shadow is a short chord: melody is night:
 Twilight is the mind of god: the spire sings seven,
 And maidens, with slow steps, climb the air to heaven.
 And Festus—Festus—dreaming on a stone,
 Dreaming in a silence, a wilderness, alone,
 Widens through the universe the rings of his dream
 In waves going faintlier, till all things seem
 Beautiful as music is, falling but to rise,
 The wise man foolish, and the thistledown wise.
 All things are music, and beautiful they are,—
 Time is a raindrop, laughter is a star;
 And the old man, climbing to a little hill of grass,
 Laughs with astonishment to see the rocks are glass,—
 Subtler than glass is! lucent as the air!
 Windows through the earth! and he stands in a stare,
 With a blue sky above him, and a bluer sky below,
 And himself on the cloud where the seven birches grow . . .

. . . O birch-tree! . . . basalt! . . . open heart and sing
 A song of praise for Festus! crown Festus king.
 Statelier than God made, he makes the world anew,—
 A world more beautifully dedicate for you.

IV

Twilight, in the old grey house of Festus,—
 The heart of Festus; and Festus there
 Sorrowfully, amid the webs of centuries,
 Breaking the bitter bread of despair.
 Twilight, the melancholy, slow wave of azure,

Putting out the lamps of dream.
 Dust, from the stars of dust, quietly sifting,
 And webs on the heart that used to gleam.

Time—the falling of old bells into the sea
 Whence nothing returns again;
 Life, the lifting of hands to the sunlight
 Whose edge is pain. . . .
 O small weak foolish brain that dared, that dared
 To dream it could ever shape
 A world more singing out of this dust, ourselves!
 To dream it could ever escape

The slow dull speech of dust, the gesture of dust,
 The corruption of dust, and death. . . .
 “What but a spider am I among these webs
 That shake against my breath?”
 Light your candle,—you see one web the more,
 The web whereto in pain you are bound.
 Cry, sing, pray—and silence is a vaster silence.
 We are but dust, and of dust the sound.

PART V

HE IS A MIRROR AND PERCEIVES HIS VACUITY

I

OLD MAN

Of the gods, Festus, truly there is no knowing:
 A sorrowful lot are the gods, indifferent they are.
 Better to snare with a net the blue wind's blowing,
 Or scoop from a pool, with the palm of your hand, a star.

FESTUS

The worlds revolve, Old Man, the worlds revolve:
 And miserably through the darkness we take our way.

OLD MAN

Give yourself gods, if you wish, with beautiful names,
Cry to them, morning and evening; on the steps of temples
Let silver trumpets with cloths of scarlet be blown,
Shattering sunlight and driving poor birds to the clouds:
Fall by the altar of him, your favourite god,
Pale let your face be, famished your body, lie prone.
Implore him, adore him; and visions, perhaps, like a fume
Will glisten and coil in the dusk of your brain's little room.
Yet god, though no smaller he be than the shell of the world
No greater is, truly, than the green blade of grass.

FESTUS

Miserably through the darkness we take our way . . .
Alas, that into this darkness which is ourselves
The light of ourselves sends forward so feeble a ray!

OLD MAN

And why should we trouble ourselves with a god whom we know
not—
A god whom, god willing, we never shall know?
The world is the mirror of god; and we are but fragments.
And how shall a mirror look into its own depths, Festus?
And say that it did—what truly, save mirror, would show?

FESTUS

The light of ourselves, the small pointed light that so wavers
Amid this forest, ourselves, this forest of shadows—
Ah, in that place, how the weak voice is frightened and quavers!

OLD MAN

We cannot know god. Whence came we, or whither we go—
Trifles! Ignore them. Mere knowledge is nothing.
We come from the shadow, into shadow we blow,
Shadow we are, shadows only we know.

FESTUS

And yet, Old Man, it is something, amid these shadows,—
 Out of such weakness, amid such pain,—
 To have conceived a god! . . .
 Greater, more nobly dark, is the vault of the brain
 Which has conceived a god! . . .

OLD MAN

Ah, Festus, think how foolish would be that mirror
 Which, gazing into itself,—if it could do so,—
 And seeing a cloud, and blue sky, imaged there,
 Cried out: "Behold how nobler than other mirrors
 Am I, who have here conceived a sky, a cloud,
 And small birds flying in a blue depth of air!"
 The mirror reflects all things that pass before it.
 The mind conceives those things that made and move it.
 Ah, Festus, there is conceiving
 Even in disbelieving!—

FESTUS

When we adore, it is the ancient god
 Aroused in us, by his delight in light,
 To praise himself with a sudden cry.
 When we lament, it is his burden of sorrow,
 The sorrowful knowledge of his imperfection,
 Rising into the infinite like a sigh.
 Wretched is he! . . . how far more wretched we,
 Who have no selves, who are but lyre and flute
 Broken by him, or blown upon, or mute!
 Only in silence, only in nothingness,
 We have our being. . . . Let silence be our god!
 Sleep be our beauty, darkness our abode . . .

OLD MAN

Sleep be our beauty, darkness our abode . . .
 White be our sleep, in a vast blue tent of starlight!
 Yet let us dream. . . . Ah, though our selves be nothing,

Less than a shadow of clouds on a great water,
Less than a vapour of dew in the morning ascending,
Yes, though the dream be god's and not our own,
And the delight of the dream be also his,—
Still, let us dream. . . . Delight and dream are his,
Yet, dreaming and delighting, we are god;
Dream and delight are ours.

FESTUS

How deep this forest of ourselves-in-god!
How pale the little lanterns of our faces! . .

OLD MAN

Beautiful are these boughs in the lamp-light seen . . .
Upward they soar and bear the stars for fruits.
And the clouds of leaves—are they watery blue? or green?—
Like clouds of moonlight blowing in darkness above us;
And downward, below this shell of the earth that trembles,
Reaching to stars still farther, go the roots.
How the world sings and shudders and swings about us!
Nothing is stable. We move, and the vast web trembles.
One false step and we fall . . . we fall . . .

FESTUS

How far, Old Man?—Only from the hand to the heart;
Only from god-in-ourselves to god-in-god.
Let the world shake to the sound of our foolish feet!
Across and across it, weave the skein of our footsteps.
Loud be our speech, for the echo is sweet.

OLD MAN

The worlds revolve, Festus,—the worlds revolve
In fiery rings down a blue airy vortex;
And the sound of enormous suns that clang together
Comes gently, after the centuries, to god,—
—A pleasant blur of cymbals.
Yet you and I, who walk here in this forest

Of arches under the stars, this goblin forest
 We call our minds—how are we not astonished
 That all this whirling lays not hold of us
 And flings us out and down like fiery dust-motes
 Into the vortex,—trees, rocks, dreams and all? . . .
 Truly, my knees grow weak at the thought of it . . .
 Yet I can laugh at the vision of you, Festus,
 Shooting head-foremost upward like a comet!
 Amazed and open-mouthed, your words of wisdom
 Sucked out of you by the wind!

FESTUS

. . . Sea-pools, amid salt sea-rocks, in the evening
 Take the pale light of the sky, and lying still
 Catch the first star . . . The great pale joyless sea
 Reaching forever restlessly,
 Poor vacant slave to every whim of the air,
 Cries there, beyond the rocks, wails at the sands,
 Unconscious of the stars. . . . In the blue evening
 After the sunset, when the bastions of gold and vermilion,
 The walls of violet, the pinnacles of opal and chrysolite,
 Have crumbled fierily into the sea,
 When the sea-birds are no longer rose-enkindled,
 And one long cloud in the west lies smooth as stone:
 Sea-pools, amid salt-sea-rocks, lying still,
 Take the pale light of the sky, and without effort
 Catch the first star. . . . Profound, profound and silent,
 Thus comes the miracle: it is the secret of azure.
 The brown sea-snails in the pool are undisturbed.

OLD MAN

Ah miserable destiny, Festus, miserable destiny,
 To be, in the blue universe of the sea-pool,
 A crab! . . . a crab for the most part silent,
 That, softly sidling from coign of rock to coign,
 Delicately touching, under the limpid water,
 The hard edges of rocks with the tips of his claws,
 Yet, shakes the pool, or pierces with his back
 The azure . . . and routs the star.

FESTUS

Or sadder still

To be a pool inhabited by a crab;
And nightly to lose the image of one's desire
In one's own agitation, like the sea.

OLD MAN

You be the pool, Festus, and I the crab,
And in the blue twilight let us enact our drama . . .
It is the twilight hour of pilgrimage,
The infinite moment in the finite day.
On the blue arch we stand, the void beneath us,
A world at either end. . . . How slowly, slowly,
The sea-gull settles in the pale air of heaven!
Like a rose-petal is he, he falls more softly.

FESTUS

It is the twilight hour of pilgrimage . . .
The forest, to which we descend with curious footsteps,
The forest of ourselves, begins to darken . . .
Was that a footstep? and were those voices?—indistinct . . .

OLD MAN

It was perhaps the murmur of the blood
In our poor ears, so weary of long silence.

FESTUS

It is a music—it begins to rise
How delicately! like the breathing forth of leaves
In the slow forest of decay and birth!
It is as if the earth itself should sigh
Through the points of grass . . .

OLD MAN

Let us approach it: it is a solemn sound,
A shade too serious—but let us approach it.

FESTUS

The sounds of silver rise—it is as if
A tree grew fragrantly out of a well of light:
The tree itself, and all its boughs, of light,
And the leaves exhaled on the air as faint as sound . . .
Do you not feel, Old Man, as if this tree
Grew over you, and had its roots in you?

OLD MAN

We are the earth: this music is our tree . . .
And yet what misery it wakes in me!

FESTUS

Thus do we learn the unhappiness of god
When the mood takes him to create a world.
The boughs, like melancholy aspirations,
Turn in the fire of his heart, the fine leaves glisten,
They sing in the air. . . . O bitter it is to love,
To shape with the hands of desire, to draw from darkness
The sleeping sorrowful dream. . . . My eyes grow heavy,
My heart grows old, and aches with a too-great burden;
How sweet, now, would be sleep.

OLD MAN

Is it a music? . . . Just now it had a sound
Of human voices . . . voices of animals . . .
Discordant and melancholy . . . harsh . . .

FESTUS

It is a music dark and many-voiced
Perplexed and sorrowful . . .
How like the voices of the memory
It rises among the leaves! . . .
Moonlight, moonlight and rain—the sound of the leaves
When the cloud comes between them and the moon—
The secret of rain in the seclusion of night—

And the lover and his beloved in the darkness
 Listening to the sound of rain, the sound of hearts,
 The moving of hands unseen. . . .

OLD MAN

Memory . . . a flight of wind through the forest of the mind,
 Prolonged, prolonged and strange.
 Whence comes it? . . . the boughs are in confusion,
 Leaves fall, clouds gallop over the breathless moon,
 Ghosts are blown from tombs. . . . O singular miracle
 To see our universe so blow and change
 Obedient to this foolish wind from Nowhere!

FESTUS

The azure pool, the pool about the fountain,
 Is perpetually astonished and replenished
 By the flowing of the source that made and keeps it:
 "Whence comes this water? It rises through myself,
 Shoots upward, falls upon me, making rings
 Of vanishing foam, filling the air with rainbows,
 Drawing about me the happy chatter of birds. . . ."
 Thus rises memory; and thus this music
 Rises out of the secrecy of ourselves
 To fall upon us in rings of agitation.
 To you, Old Man, what can it say to you
 Save colour of sun, of light, sweet shapes of stones,
 The delicate feel of dust? . . . But ah, to me
 How richly it brings the darkness of great love!

OLD MAN

Is it a music? Again it had a sound
 Of anguished voices—voices of animals—
 Animals being murdered. . . .

FESTUS

Sorrowful darkness in which we lose ourselves
 To find the infinite . . . Hear how the beloved's heart

Beats in the darkness and becomes the world!
Dreamless and thoughtless we lie together in darkness
My hand is over her heart to hold its beating,
My mouth is over her mouth . . . ah divine murmur
Of mingled breath! . . . the world that sharply flowers,
The world in happiness!

OLD MAN

Alas, poor flesh! . . . You are a lover, Festus:
You have permitted this poor dull body of yours
To sing your wits away. So now this music
Falls over you like the voice of your beloved. . . .
Resist it! Be not moved. It is a music
Of mortal origin and fleshly texture.
Who knows if to god's ears it may be only
A scream of pain?

FESTUS

It is a beauty of sound past all enduring;
The cry of the finite for the infinite;
The song of the infinite rising out of the darkness
Of the finite wall. It takes my soul from me.
Go nearer: part the boughs: say what you see!

OLD MAN

It is a music. . . . Festus, I see them playing:
Among the trees: grotesque their faces are:
They sit in the moonlight, drawing their bows together . . .
It is the orchestra of butchers, Festus!
Gathered for holiday. . . . They wear white aprons,
Green do they look in the moonlight, like green aprons
Darkly spotted. . . . How sweet their music is! . . .
The hands that held the cleaver draw the bow.

FESTUS

Thus ends our pilgrimage! We come at last,
Here, in the twilight forests of our minds,

To this black dream. . . . Better it would have been
To have remained forever there in the rain,
Planting our beans together in the wind-worn plain! . . .
Let us return. . . . Are you content? . . . Let us return! . . .
Where are you? I am alone . . . I am alone.

II

And at last, having sacked in imagination many cities
And seen the smoke of them spread fantastically along the sky,
Having set foot upon so many walls, fallen and blackened,
And heard the harsh lamentations of women,
And watched without pity the old men, betraying their vileness,
Tear at their beards, and curse, and die,
Festus, coming alone to an eastern place
Of brown savannahs and wind-gnawed trees,
Climbed a rock that faced alone to the northward
And sat, and clasped his knees.

There was before him the confluence of three rivers:
One from the north, one from the east, one from the west.
The one from the east was blue, the one from the west was green,
Black was the one from the north, and snow was on its breast.
The sound of their roaring came up in waves on the wind,
Into the tumultuous darkness of the south they went,
And Festus sat for a day and a night and watched them
And wondered what they meant.

"Look, Festus, how without regard for you and all your sorrow
The huge sun rises and crosses the sky
And your ridiculous shadow circles about you
Shortening and lengthening silently!
What does it matter to the sun that your robe is scarlet?
That the sword at your hand is old and green!
Already the winds gnaw at you, as they have gnawed at these trees,
Careless of the many things you have done and seen."

The day ended, and the slow-wheeling magnificent constellations
Glided like lights of ships down the river of space,
And Festus was disturbed once more, and wished to speak,
And heavily raised his head at last in sorrow,

And turned towards the stars his face,
And said: "Look, Festus, how yet once more the immortals
Kindle their delicate lanterns and walk in the sky
While you on a lonely hill sit alone in sadness
And remember that you must die!
Look at the stars, Festus, treader of kingdoms,
You who carried the world like a bird in a cage,
You whose heart is a desert, gaunt with winter,
You whose sword in youth was a sevenfold lightning
Now worn and green with age!
Look! the immortals once more in the sky of your heart
The immortals you scorned and forgot
Walk in the dim blue gardens softly apart
To a music you taught them not! . . ."

Festus in starlight watched how the three great rivers
Bearing perpetual stars on their breasts, roared down
To gorges and chasms and desolate plains
And jungles of death and labyrinthine cities
Swept to pale harmonies by suns and rains;

And thought of the thousands of nights and days like music
Woven by him, and the roses of love and death
Fallen in petals in the darkness of his heart,
And he sent among them a breath
And set them blowing and trembling again, on graves,
On the stones of streets, by door and path and wall,
Whirled in the air from the boughs of swinging trees
To stream like stars on the wind and slowly fall
For the hands of children, the hair of women, the hearts of lovers,
The coffins waiting beneath the swinging trees,
And the myriad eyes that in his veins went to and fro
Seeking a dream forever and finding no ease.

"Listen, Festus! How the multitudes within you
Make a slow misty music of their own!
See how the walls of cities grow young again,
With the spring upon them blown!
And you too, Festus! Treader in blood of kingdoms!
You walk in a moonlit world of dream
And you and the worlds about you are young once more
And blossom and tinkle and sing and gleam!"

Then Festus laughed, for he looked in his heart and saw
 His worlds made young again,
 And heard the sound of a many-peopled music,
 And joyously into the world of himself set forward
 Forgetting the long black aftermath of pain.

PRIAPUS AND THE POOL

. . . Was God, then, so derisive as to shape us
 In the image of Priapus? . . .

(Priapus? Who was he?)

Are we never to be left by our desires,
 But forever try to warm our foolish hearts
 At these illusory fires?

(Priapus! . . . do you mean a terminal figure
 In a garden by a sea?)

It is strange! for one so easily conceives
 A quieter world, in which the flesh and dust
 Are contented, do not hunger, or thirst, or lust. . . .

(Priapus! . . . But, I don't know who you mean.
 Do you intimate God played some trick upon us? . . .
 I will tell you about a pool that I have seen!

It is very old, it is very deep and clear,
 No one knows how deep it is,
 The ancient trees are about it in an ancient forest,
 It is a pool of mysteries!)

. . . It is puzzling, none the less, to understand
 How God, if he is less or more than flesh,
 Could have devised for us, walking in his garden,
 The delicate imperfections of this mesh. . . .

(When it is clear, the pool reflects the trees—
 Look down, and you will see the flight of a bird
 Among the wavering boughs! But when a breeze

Comes slowly from that wood, the pool is stirred,
And a shadow like the skeleton of a cloud
Shivers like a ghost across it, puffs and passes. . . .
When it is still, the sky comes back again,
And at the fringes it reflects the grasses.)

. . . Must we always, like Priapus in a wood,
In the underbrush of our perplexities,
Pursue our maidens—pursuer and pursued? . . .

(I will not say it is not sometimes troubled!
It is very old; strange things are imaged there.
Out of its depths at night the stars have bubbled;
And into its depths maidens have hung their hair.
Leaves have fallen into it without number
And never been found again.
Birds have sung above it in the ancient trees.
And sometimes raindrops fall upon it, and then
There are rings of silver upon it, spreading and fading,
Delicately intersecting. . . .
But if you return again when the sky is cloudless,
You will find it clear again, and coldly reflecting.
Reflecting the ancient trees of the ancient forest,
And the ancient leaves, ready to fall once more,
And the blue sky under the leaves, old and empty,
And the savage grasses along the shore.)

. . . Priapus, himself, was never disenchanted. . . .
Why, then, did God permit us to be haunted
By this sense of imperfections? . . .

(But can a pool remember its reflections?
That is the thing that troubles me!
Does it remember the cloud that falls upon it,
Or the indignation of a tree?
Or suppose that once the image of Priapus
Fell quivering in ferocious sunshine there
As he came suddenly upon it from his forest
With fir-cones in his hair—
Would the pool, through the silences thereafter,

Recall that visitation and be stirred
Any more than it would hear and heed the laughter
Of a swinging ape, or the singing of a bird?)

. . . Was God, then, so derisive as to shape us
In the image of Priapus? . . .

(It is very old, it is very deep and clear,
No one knows how deep it is!
The ancient trees are about it in an ancient forest,
It is a pool of mysteries.)

I

The viola ceased its resonant throbbing, the violin
Was silent, the flute was still.
The voice of the singer was suddenly hushed. Only
The silence seemed to thrill

With the last echo of music, hovering over
The nodding heads of the listeners bowed and few;
And I became aware of the long light through a window,
Of the beauty of silence, of the beauty of you

Never so sharply known as when, beside you,
I dared not look to see
What thought shone out of your face, or if, like marble,
It hid its thought from me.

Never so lovely had music seemed, as when
Its lips were closed, its beauty said,
Its arrow of sound lost forever in the singing of the infinite;
And I could not turn my head,

In the motionless azure of silence that descended upon us,
Lest, somehow, you should not be there,
Or shine too much or little with the momentary beauty
Of which I was bitterly aware.

It was as if the mingled clear voices of the music,
Which the heart for a moment happily knew,

Had somehow, in the instant of their cessation,
Falling from air, become the beauty of you.

O white-flamed chord of many notes miraculously sung
In the blue universe of silence there for me:
I shall remember you thus when you are old and I am saddened;
And continents darken between us, or the silence of the sea.

II

In the moonlight I cry out, in the sunlight I bitterly exclaim,
I curse myself, turning my eyes upon my wretchedness;
Lamentable it is to be caught once more in the net of red flame;
Only in the darkness without stars I at last lie still.

I have despised the universe that could so scheme to capture
The ridiculous sparrow in its futile red net of desire.
Now I despise no more. The city shines suddenly with rapture.
The sky burns bright, the trees bend their heads in a dream.

Voices of delight rise out of the stones beneath my feet,
Azure the dusk is, the waters are singing. Wondering I stand
While the universe deepens about me. Sword-sharp-sweet,
Your voice, that I remember faintly, pierces my heart.

O light of the clear blue sky, for the first time known:
I am the solitary leaf that burns and falls
Shrivelled under your immensity, ecstatically blown
Down to the dust and darkness. Forget not me.

III

When trout swim down Great Ormond Street,
And sea-gulls cry above them lightly,
And hawthorns heave cold flagstones up
To blossom whitely,

Against old walls of houses there,
Gustily shaking out in moonlight
Their country sweetness on sweet air;
And in the sunlight,

By the green margin of that water,
 Children dip white feet and shout,
 Casting nets in the braided water
 To catch the trout:

Then I shall hold my breath and die,
 Swearing I never loved you; no,
 'You were not lovely!' I shall cry,
 'I never loved you so.'

IV

This is the shape of the leaf, and this of the flower,
 And this the pale bole of the tree
 Which watches its bough in a pool of unwavering water
 In a land we never shall see.

The thrush on the bough is silent, the dew falls softly,
 In the evening is hardly a sound.
 And the three beautiful pilgrims who come here together
 Touch lightly the dust of the ground,

Touch it with feet that trouble the dust but as wings do,
 Come shyly together, are still,
 Like dancers who wait, in a pause of the music, for music
 The exquisite silence to fill.

This is the thought of the first, and this of the second,
 And this the grave thought of the third:
 'Linger we thus for a moment, palely expectant,
 And silence will end, and the bird

'Sing the pure phrase, sweet phrase, clear phrase in the twilight
 To fill the blue bell of the world;
 And we, who on music so leaflike have drifted together,
 Leaflike apart shall be whirled

'Into what but the beauty of silence, silence forever?' . . .
 . . . This is the shape of the tree,
 And the flower, and the leaf, and the three pale beautiful pil-
 grims;
 This is what you are to me.

V

And already the minutes, the hours, the days,
Separate thoughts and separate ways,
Fall whitely and silently and slowly between us,
Fall between us like phantasmal rain and snow.
And we, who were thrust for an instant so sharply together,
Under changing skies to alien destinies go.

Melody heard in the midnight on the wind,—
Orange poppy of fire seen in a dream,—
Vainly I try to keep you. How the sky,
A great blue wind, with a gigantic laugh,
Scorns us apart like chaff.
Like a bird blown to sea am I.

O let us hold, amid these immensities,
The blinding blaze of the hostile infinite,
To the one clear phrase we knew and still may know:
Walls rise daily and darkly between us
But love has seen us,
Wherever we go love too must go.

Beautiful, twilight, mysterious, bird-haunted land
Seen from the ship, with the far pale shore of sand,
And the blue deep folds of hills inviting the stars to rest,
Though I shall never set foot there, nor explore you,
Nor hear your angelus of bells about me, I shall adore you
And know you still the best.

VI

Let me suppose your ghost sits here beside me—
You, who are living still, but dead for me—
For friendly talk. And let me suppose you say,—
Clasping long hands together in a familiar way,
Giving your profile, only, for me to see,—

The charming wisdoms, exquisitely said,
That often have made me lift in delight my head
As for a glimpse of heights, in the sky, unknown;

O let me suppose, for this deliciousness,
A quiet room, and we two there alone,

Facing in dusk the mirror's watery stare
At the pale panelled wall, and the quiet air
Which yet not even a candle-flame shall fever;
With two blue vases above us, and no clock
Whose febrile insistent tiny voice might mock
The illusion that we sit here so forever:

Only your beauty, and my agitation,
To make, of the tranquil scene, a situation.
O then perhaps at last I would say to you
The words I have often implored myself to say:
'Let us no longer try what wit can do!

'But see, with the poor courage we command,
Sadly, profoundly, without a tremor of hand
Or faltering of the long delicious gaze,
The wretched beauty our hopeless love has given;
And speak at last, in silence, the perfect praise

'So long withheld! O let us together move
Unmoving, in the rich knowledge of our love,
Touching—not hand to hand, since that's forbidden,—
But wing to wing, in our full consciousness;
Stirring the luminous twilight to confess
That love like ours no longer can be hidden.'

Thus let us sit, in silence, without motion,
While the moment shakes bright leaves above us; then,
I would have you say, laying aside your wit,
Quite simply: 'It began, in such a way,
That afternoon—do you recall the day?—
We walked together!' . . . A pause, then, exquisite,

Infinite, azure, deep as the world is deep;
And I, like one arousing himself from sleep,
Would answer: 'And I too, that afternoon,
Turning toward you, to tell you of a tree
Which held, among its half-fledged leaves, the moon,

'Suddenly felt your beauty over me
Falling like light. My eyes filled. I could see
Nothing, thenceforth, but you' . . . And silence again;
While, for a moment infinite in duration,
Our troubled eyes, across our separation,
Found, beneath our blessing, infinite pain.

VII

Why is it, as I enter at last the panelled room,
And pause, having opened the door,
And turning my eyes from wall to wall in the gloom
Find all as it was before,—

Something, a slow, grave, passionless wave of grief,
So whelms me in silence there,
That I listen, like one who loses his only belief,
In vain to the voiceless air?

Did I expect, in my absence, that you had come—
You, or a sign from you—
To lend a voice to a beauty that else was dumb?
But alas, there is nothing new,

The room is the same, the same, there has been no change,
The table, the chairs are the same,
Nothing has altered, nothing is singing and strange,
No hover of light or flame;

And the walls have not, as in an illusion of spring,
Blossomed, nor the oaken chair
Put forth pale leaves, nor is there a bird to sing
In the mystically widened air.

Yet if you had come, and stood for an instant dreaming,
And thought my name and gone,
Leaving behind you hardly a stir of seeming,
I should no less have known;

For this would have been no longer the hated room
Whose walls imprison me now,

But the infinite heavens, and one white bough in bloom,
And a bird to sing on the bough.

VIII

Dante, walking once by the muddy river,
Watched the inscrutable angel pass him by,
Shutting her flower-like heart. . . . He turned his torment
To torture of a world let slowly die.

But I shall hide my torment like a fever
Within my breast, rejoicing when it feeds
Upon my heart; then only being certain
I live, when most my weak heart burns and bleeds.

Singular ending! brutal, perverse, unlooked for.
There, by the river, had I turned my head
To the shy doubtful exquisite smile you proffered
I should not now so slowly, like one dead,

Move as among the damned, unknown, unseeing,
Crying to heaven with lips that make no sound:
Heavily yearning downward, as the clay does,
Hapless and hopeless, parted from the ground.

IX

There is nothing moving there, in that desert of silence,
Nothing living there, not even a blade of grass.
The morning there is as silent as the evening,
The nights and days with an equal horror pass.

Nothing moving except the cold, slow shadow
Thrown on sand by a boulder, or by the cliff
Whose rock not even a lichen comes to cover,
To hide—from what?—time's ancient hieroglyph.

The sun, at noon, sings like a flaming cymbal
Above that waste: but the waste makes no reply.
In all that desolation of rock and gravel
There is no water, no answer to the sky.

Sometimes, perhaps, from other lands more happy,
A faint wind, slow, exhausted, ventures there,
And loses itself in silence, like a music.
And then—who knows?—beneath that alien air,

Which moves mysteriously as memory over
Forlorn abysms and peaks of stone and sand,
Ghosts of delight awake for a shining moment,
And all is troubled, and that desolate land

Remembers grass and flowers, and birds that sang there
Their miracles of song in lovely trees,
And waters that poured, or stood, in dreaming azure,
Praising the sky. Perhaps once more it sees

The rose, the moon, the pool, in the blue evening,
And knows that silence in which one bird will sing
Slowly and sleepily his praise of gardens.
Perhaps once more, for a moment, it remembers spring.

X

HE

Say that we move together, sorrowful and silent,
To one high window which out-tops the sky,
And see, in the dusk, not even the crests of beech-trees,
Not even, in the wide blue, the flash of a bird.
And there, as if we stood alone on a headland,
Facing, in the long sunlight, all the sea,
Search the blue twilight of infinity;
And do not say a word.

SHE

You are romantic, you exaggerate;
It is a balcony on which we stand.

HE

This much you grant: we stand there so together.
What can it matter, if, questioning thus the starlight,

We do not trouble to regard each other?
Think what you will: be but a consciousness
Of night, and music that is sentimental—
Night, and the balustrade beneath your hand.
Say that you do not love me, never loved,
Know naught of love, nor think it worth the knowing.
Yet lies the infinite with all its azure
Like a vast sea around us, glares us up
For a long moment into terrible nothing.
And we are frightened; and we stand and stare
Into that shining silence, and are glad,
As lovers are, to feel the other there.

SHE

That is not love that takes but what it finds
In a dark hour. If frightened here, we cling,
It is not love, it is a transient thing.
Say afterward: We did not love, but only
Together turned for one inscrutable moment,
Held in the hand of the infinite, being lonely.
This is an intimacy we shall forget.
We shall be strangers yet.

HE

It is the moment in which the infinite
Closes about us. Turn, therefore, to me.
Call it what name you will, brief let it be;
Be conscious, if you must, of loneliness
And little else: but if this is not love,
Then nothing is. The stars, the night, the music
Eddy away beneath us and are gone.
We stand here. We are living. We are alone.

XI

The mirror says: Condole not too profoundly
With the pale thing you see yourself to be.
Do not recall that dead men sleep so soundly,
Nor wanly see

The sad procession passing, as a symbol
Of your so-much-to-be-pitied state of mind.
What you would shut in a coffin is too nimble
To be confined.

Look! as you search these depths, gleefully seeing
The atomy spectral coffin darkly pass,
Far off flashes a gesture of someone fleeing;
Across the glass,

In that small circle of shadow (which I show you
Your introspective eye is) goes the ghost
Of a delightful grief which seems to know you
Yet counts you lost.

She turns her dark young beautiful head toward you,
Sombrely looks at you, and, least foreseen,
Dazzlingly smiles at you, as if to reward you—
Most generous queen!—

For the one word not said, the light betrayed not;
And turning upon the dusk is vaguely gone
Out of that world of yours she sought not, made not,
Nor would have known.

O rain of light! Ten times a day you stand here
To watch that brown-eyed ghost of delight escape,
Happy in knowing you now forever command here
That lovely shape.

XII

I shut my eyes, I try to remember you.
But as a diver plunging down through sunlight
To meet his azure shadow on the wide water
Shatters through it and is gone,
Thus I, coming suddenly upon your ghost,
See it but cannot grasp it: it is lost.
I stand in the dark and call you. I am alone.

Come to me: stand before me: turn your head
Sharply against the light: put forth one hand
Holding an amber bead: then let it fall.
Say 'It is nothing!' Slowly rise and move,
Darkened, against the open window; against the wall
Pause, with the sombre gesture that I love,
And slowly say, 'I do not understand.'

How I have seen you! How I have drunk of you!
Now, when I most would have you, you escape.
Thus is your mouth? or thus? I do not know.
But see, I ignore you now, bewildering shape,
Flee in the darkness from you. . . . And you come
Laughing before me, saying, 'I love you so!'

XIII

Now over the grass you come,
Gravely you come with a slow step
Into the azure world I call my heart:
Tardily you approach me.

Butterflies of the sun flicker about you—
Who could have foreseen it?
Moths of the moon at your finger-tips
Melt like flakes of snow.

Is it not too late that you come?
Are you not merely a ghost?
Behold, before you once speak my name,
Wind whirls us apart like leaves.

Never again, after this dream, shall I have peace.
In my heart is nothing but the crying of snow.
The grass over which I seek you is white with frost.
You have left upon it no footstep.

I place my most secret thought
Like a bough of magnolia
Where perhaps you will find it and remember.
It withers, and you do not come.

XIV

Suddenly, as I gaze at the sombre land in the picture,
The bridge, the enchanted stream, the long, long watery plain,
And the dark wood, and the small far houses, and the blue hills
Flashing like dolphins under a light like rain;

Look! The picture has opened! the sounds come in,
Broad, rich streaming, in the late light of the sun,
The whole wide land is a flood of mysterious sound! . . .
O this is the land where you have gone,

Your voice floats up to me from that bridge, I hear
The tiny words out of dusk like a gnat-song come—
'Stay! stay where you are! You will be happier there!
I will at last, perhaps, come home!'

O voice, crying the ineffable, face invisible,
Beauty intangibly gone like a tracery out of the sky!
Come back! . . . But the window closes. Bridge, stream,
houses, hills,
Are silent. Small is the picture. None stirs in the world save I.

XV

✓There was an island in the sea
That out of immortal chaos reared
Towers of topaz, trees of pearl,
For maidens adored and warriors feared.

Long ago it sunk in the sea;
And now, a thousand fathoms deep,
Sea-worms above it whirl their lamps,
Crabs on the pale mosaic creep.

Voyagers over that haunted sea
Hear from the waters under the keel
A sound that is not wave or foam;
Nor do they only hear, but feel

The timbers quiver, as eerily comes
Up from the dark an elfin singing

Of voices happy as none can be,
And bells an ethereal anthem ringing.

Thereafter, where they go or come,
They will be silent; they have heard
Out of the infinite of the soul
An incommunicable word;

Thereafter, they are as lovers who
Over an infinite brightness lean:
'It is Atlantis!', all their speech;
'To lost Atlantis have we been.'

XVI

See, as the carver carves a rose,
A wing, a toad, a serpent's eye,
In cruel granite, to disclose
The soft things that in hardness lie,

So this one, taking up his heart,
Which time and change had made a stone,
Carved out of it with dolorous art,
Labouring yearlong and alone,

The thing there hidden—rose, toad, wing?
A frog's hand on a lily pad?
Bees in a cobweb—? No such thing!
A girl's head was the thing he had,

Small, shapely, richly crowned with hair,
Drowsy, with eyes half closed, as they
Looked through you and beyond you, clear
To something farther than Cathay:

Saw you, yet counted you not worth
The seeing, thinking all the while
How, flower-like, beauty comes to birth;
And thinking this, began to smile.

Medusa! For she could not see
The world she turned to stone and ash.
Only herself she saw, a tree
That flowered beneath a lightning-flash.

Thus dreamed her face—a lovely thing,
To worship, weep for, or to break.
Better to carve a claw, a wing,
Or, if the heart provide, a snake.

XVII

Fade, then,—die, depart, and come no more—
You, whose beauty I abhor—
Out of my brain
Take back your voice that lodges there in pain,
Tear out your thousand golden roots
That thrust their tentacles in my heart
But bear no fruits.

Now like an exquisite but sterile tree
Your beauty grows in me
And feeds on light
Its lifted arms of leaves and blossoms white.
Come birds, come bees,
And marry flower with flower that it may bear
Like other trees.

Or else let hatred like a lightning come,
And flash, and strike it numb,
And strew on rock
These singing leaves, that, singing, seem to mock.
Thus let my heart once more be naked stone,
Bare under wind and hard with grief,
And leave not in a single crevice
A single leaf.

XVIII

First the white crocus, and then the purple; then the rain
Daylong and nightlong lashing the bitter garden,
Blurring, by day, the light on the window-pane,

Beating by night with talons. And after the rain
A cold clear day, no crocus left; and shrill
In the high cold poplar a ruffled robin singing;
And, in the cold grass, one clear daffodil,
Downcast, in pale light swinging.

First the red tulip, and then the white; and then the wind
Daylong and nightlong curving long poplar boughs
To green sonorous arcs against blue heaven,
The new leaves baffled. And after that carouse
A steamy fog that clings to tree and bush
And hides the shattered tulip. Sad is he
Who slowly at daybreak walks in the bitter garden
That ruin to see.

A day? A year? They come, they go, like weather,
Give leaves or take them. Here alone I move
Slowly in this small garden, deeply regarding
The flower, the tree, the grass, the weed, I love;
Dig here, plant there, or with a sickle cut
The too-thick clover. But whether there or here,
Have with me, for my calendar, crocus, tulip,
Daffodil, robin; and they say 'a year.'

Doomed brightly, darkly doomed, doomed from the first!
And sleep becomes but the gateway to a dream
Of a wise intimacy I never knew.
Now must I seek you in a garden gleam
Of tulip petals fallen, crocus withered,
Lilacs in bud, a sickle's edge. At night
I dream we walk and talk beneath low lime-trees
Palely in flower, as under an arch of light;

The petals, greener than golden, fall or hover,
Blow, twirl, float, and litter with flame the ground,
The air is alight with pollen. And there we loiter,
Laughing deliciously, and hear the slow sound
Of our two voices, happily weaving together
A harmony simple in seeming but strange beyond thought:
The words we say are beautiful, but have no meaning;
And as I wake and repeat them, they are nought.

First the white crocus, and then the purple; then the rain
Drawing its grey diagonals across the garden,
Wrinkling, by day, the light on the window-pane,
Scratching by night with claws. And after the rain
The unfamiliar silence in which we wake,
And seek, no longer storm-and-fever-tossed,
In the cool dark for a pale brightness dreamed of:
And find, at last, the memory of something lost.

XIX

Bitter nasturtium, pale pink phlox, scarlet william
Wrung like blood-drops from the suffering earth,
Dance in the southwest wind in the lamentable garden:
They are poor words to stammer your worth!—
Or curses for you; or, in the colourless moonlight,
Black cries and imprecations; with slow hands
I tear the offending heads off, strip them, smell them,
And crush them under my heel against harsh sands.

Come out of the earth like these with earth upon you,
Hands soiled with loam, lips flecked, the sunset cheek
Fouled with black webs and leaves, and the rich hair
Inhabited by spiders. I would speak
Not then as one fool to another babbles,
But with a natural tongue, as leaf to leaf
Nasturtium touches phlox in the dewy morning,
And the strong stems, growing together, know no grief.

But you are poisonous, dyed deep in death,
Black at the heart! Grow here, and you will spread
A low rank mist that, snake-like amid the flowers,
Will coil, delighting them, and leave them dead.
But ah, to have you like that snake pass by,
Drawing against my palms your viscous scales
Of venomous colours and translucent brightness!

There

My blossom falls upon you, my strong leaf fails.

XX

You are indifferent: think not of me:
Lead a wild life of days strangely begot,
Days that rise from a different source than mine,
Days that come up like giants out of the sea.
How should you think of me?
How should you think of one you never knew,
Who never disclosed his heart to you?

Now to a picture stoop you, now to an image,
Now to an idol you abase your knees,
Walk in a dim light praying, touch your heart
With tears of imagined gods. You sigh for these,
O foolish one! and seas
Send up star-bearing giants of days to you,
Rich in all lovely things; you knew

What words I said to you by a tall window
Where the sunlight came in mottled through a vine:
But you forget them. And the blue giants come
Bearing vast days how different from mine,
Globed, perfect, light as wine,
In which young gods like tyrannous dancers move
To music that is the voice of love.

Sleep, if you remember me not in waking; dream
Of one word lightly and profoundly said
By him you had forgotten, whose dim face
Is dimmer than faces of remembered dead:
Half wake, and turn your head,
Wondering who he was and what he meant.
Then I shall be content.

XXI

See now, after all these days I have the strength,
Yes, now at length,
To drive you forth, pale ghost! Ah, now I come
With flowers for whips and my dull heart for drum
And flog you out of the shadow of my brain,

Laughing whip you with flowers from vein to vein,
Shout, should a petal
Upon your rich hair settle,
Care not if red stains mark, or bruises dark,
Your flesh that was the integument of you,
Heed not the imagined cries,
Nor tears, if tears you have, that light your eyes.

Go, come not hither again, proud sorceress,
Idolatrous self-worshipper!
Into the tabernacle of my heart and brain
Come not again.
For now I rid me of the imperfect you,
You, halt when you would dance; you, dumb when you would
sing,
You, dark when starlike you would shine!
Now a more perfect idol shall be mine,
Now the bright goddess will I bring,
Not garlanded with flowers nor bright with gems
Nor gay with diadems,
But her more holy who is born of dream
And who like light itself shall gleam.

She whom a vision shapes
Obeys not death nor change, nor ever escapes
Her worshipper, though dull of heart he be.
So now I make her
Out of the finest azure and pale fire,
To worship, not desire,
And none but I shall take her.
You were the last and greatest of those few
In whose imperfect flesh I thought I knew
Beauty: it burned in you
Briefly and brightly.
Now that it dims, in pity I whip you forth,
Scourge you with flowers that it may hurt you less—
For you have still your loveliness—
And dream the dream that I shall worship nightly.

O come not, lest against this perfect tree
You, who were once so dear to me,

And still, alas, perhaps too dear,
Must by my zealous hands be crucified,
Nailed with strong hands against that tree immortal:
To mark the portal
Wherethrough, no longer human,
At last, at last all flesh-forgetful,
I pass, to make a dream my bride.
Come not! Lest when I find you,
Weeping I bind you,
Bandage your eyes, not lest they see
But lest they injure me:
Chain the strong hands and feet that were my joy
Not that I hate them but lest they destroy:
And dumbly watch you die, to praise that beauty
To which henceforth, I swear it by my love,
I owe all duty.

XXII

Madonna of the eyes wide open, the white hands slender,
Madonna of the young smile tremulous and tender,
And the dark turned in wings aside
From the brow white and wide:

Madonna tall, standing as one who listens
To a far grave music, music that murmurs and glistens
With a secret perhaps unguessed
And comes to rest:

Madonna tall, standing as one who lingers
To hear a melody rise from invisible fingers,
Fingers invisible to me,
Who only see

How, in your eyes, the light for a moment changes,
Darkening to an abysm which estranges
Infinities apart
Me from your heart:

Madonna of the woman's body, the face of a child,
Madonna of whom only the lips have ever smiled,

Flowers to conceal the secret tear
None see or hear:

Not of the rays of the moon, could they be cloven,
Could such a beauty of flesh as yours be woven;
Not with so subtle a mesh
As the clear flesh

Which the soft wandering dream of you keeps bright
As with the singing imprisoned bird of light:
Not out of the beauty of dust or air
Comes aught so fair.

I stand bewildered, I stand in silence before you,
Knowing only the one thing, that I adore you;
Fearing so much that speech
Will never reach,

Nor these hands touch you, nor my terrible love arouse you,
Nor the dark house of the earth I inhabit house you;
O better it were in sorrow to cry
To a birdless sky

Than with a voice or silence to importune
You, silent, inscrutable, as to the sea the dune,
Which gives to the sea's hands
Not self but sands.

It is not you I touch! . . . O strange cool being,
Even in whose laughter falls the shadow of someone fleeing,
Bewildered denial in the caress,
No in the yes,

How shall we love? For we are worlds asunder,
Between us the demon chasms wail and thunder.
Ah, terrible destiny
If you should be

Agonized victim of the perverse gods who shape you,
Destined forever to see your soul escape you,

As one who remembers, yet remembers not,
Something forgot:

Desiring to give to me, to see me live,
Your soul, yet having, alas, no soul to give;
Desiring to give, that you
Might so live too;

And waiting thus in a tragic dumb confusion,
Weaving a shining mystery of your seclusion,
Miraculous beauty of mask;
Yet when I ask

For more than the mask, for the secret light behind,
Confessing—ah, what horror!—that you are blind.
Here, then, our destiny takes us
And binds and breaks us.

SEVEN TWILIGHTS

I

The ragged pilgrim, on the road to nowhere,
Waits at the granite milestone. It grows dark.
Willows lean by the water. Pleas of water
Cry through the trees. And on the boles and boughs
Green water-lights make rings, already paling.
Leaves speak everywhere. The willow leaves
Silverly stir on the breath of moving water,
Birch-leaves, beyond them, twinkle, and there on the hill,
And the hills beyond again, and the highest hill,
Serrated pines, in the dusk, grow almost black.
By the eighth milestone on the road to nowhere
He drops his sack and lights once more the pipe
There often lighted. In the dusk-sharpened sky
A pair of night-hawks windily sweep, or fall,
Booming, toward the trees. Thus had it been

Last year, and the year before, and many years:
Ever the same. . . . "Thus turns the human track
Backward upon itself, I stand once more
By this small stream. . . ." Now the rich sound of leaves,
Turning in air to sway their heavy boughs,
Burns in his heart, sings in his veins, as spring
Flowers in veins of trees; bringing such peace
As comes to seamen when they dream of seas.
"O trees! exquisite dancers in grey twilight!
Witches! fairies! elves! who wait for the moon
To thrust her golden horn, like a golden snail,
Above that mountain!—arch your green benediction
Once more over my heart. Muffle the sound of bells,
Mournfully human, that cries from the darkening valley;
Close, with your leaves, about the sound of water;
Take me among your hearts as you take the mist
Among your boughs!" . . . Now by the granite milestone,
On the ancient human road that leads to nowhere,
The pilgrim listens, as the night air brings
The murmured echo, perpetual, from the gorge
Of barren rock far down the valley. Now,
Though twilight here, it may be starlight there;
Mist makes elfin lakes in the hollow fields;
The dark wood stands in the mist like a sombre island
With one red star above it. . . . "This I should see,
Should I go on, follow the falling road,—
This I have often seen. . . . But I shall stay
Here, where the ancient milestone, like a watchman,
Lifts up its figure eight, its one grey knowledge,
Into the twilight; as a watchman lifts
A lantern, which he does not know is out."

II

Now by the wall of the little town I lean
Myself, like ancient wall and dust and sky,
And the purple dusk, grown old, grown old in heart.
Shadows of clouds flow inward from the sea.
The mottled fields grow dark. The golden wall
Grows grey again, turns stone again; the tower,
No longer kindled, darkens against a cloud.

Old is the world, old as the world am I;
The cries of sheep rise upward from the fields,
Forlorn and strange; and wake an ancient echo
In fields my blood has known, but has not seen.
"These fields"—(an unknown voice beyond the wall
Murmurs)—"were once the province of the sea.
Where now the sheep graze, mermaids were at play;
Sea-horses galloped; and the great jewelled tortoise
Walked slowly, looking upward at the waves,
Bearing upon his back a thousand barnacles,
A white acropolis. . . ." The ancient tower
Sends out, above the houses and the trees,
And the flat fields below the mouldered walls,
A measured phrase of bells. And in the silence
I hear a woman's voice make answer then:
"Well, they are green, although no ship can sail them.
Sky-larks rest in the grass, and start up singing
Before the girl who stoops to pick sea-poppies.
Spiny, the poppies are, and oh how yellow!
And the brown clay is runnelled by the rain."
A moment since, the sheep that crop the grass
Had long blue shadows, and the grass-tips sparkled:
Now all grows old. . . . O voices strangely speaking,
Voices of man and woman, voices of bells,
Diversely making comment on our time
Which flows and bears us with it into dark,—
Repeat the things you say! Repeat them slowly
Upon this air, make them an incantation
For ancient tower, old wall, the purple twilight,
This dust, and me! . . . But all I hear is silence,
And something that may be leaves or may be sea.

III

When the tree bares, the music of it changes:
Hard and keen is the sound, long and mournful;
Pale are the poplar boughs in the evening light
Above my house, against a slate-cold cloud.
When the house ages, and the tenants leave it,
Cricket sings in the tall grass by the threshold;
Spider, by the cold mantel, hangs his web.

Here, in a hundred years from that clear season
When first I came here bearing lights and music,
To this old ghostly house my ghost will come,—
Pause in the half-light, turn by the poplar, glide
Above tall grasses through the broken door.
Who will say that he saw—or the dusk deceived him—
A mist with hands of mist blow down from the tree
And open the door and enter and close it after?
Who will say that he saw, as midnight struck
Its tremulous golden twelve, a light in the window,
And first heard music, as of an old piano,
Music remote, as if it came from the earth,
Far down; and then, in the quiet, eager voices?
“. . . Houses grow old and die, houses have ghosts—
Once in a hundred years we return, old house,
And live once more.” . . . And then the ancient answer,
In a voice not human, but more like creak of boards
Or rattle of panes in the wind—“Not as the owner,
But as a guest you come, to fires not lit
By hands of yours. . . . Through these long-silent chambers
Move slowly, turn, return, and bring once more
Your lights and music. It will be good to talk.”

IV

“This is the hour,” she said, “of transmutation:
It is the eucharist of the evening, changing
All things to beauty. Now the ancient river,
That all day under the arch was polished jade,
Becomes the ghost of a river, thinly gleaming
Under a silver cloud. It is not water:
It is that azure stream in which the stars
Bathe at the daybreak and become immortal.”
“And the moon,” said I—not thus to be outdone—
“What of the moon? Over the dusty plane-trees,
Which crouch in the dusk above their feeble lanterns,
Each coldly lighted by his tiny faith;
The moon, the waxen moon, now almost full,
Creeps whitely up. . . . Westward the waves of cloud,
Vermilion, crimson, violet, stream on the air,
Shatter to golden flakes in the icy green

Translucency of twilight. And the moon
Drinks up their light, and as they fade or darken,
Brightens. O monstrous miracle of the twilight,
That one should live because the others die!"

"Strange too," she answered, "that upon this azure
Pale-gleaming ghostly stream, impalpable—
So faint, so fine, that scarcely it bears up
The petals that the lantern strews upon it,—
These great black barges float like apparitions,
Loom in the silver of it, beat upon it,
Moving upon it as dragons move on air!"

"Thus always," then I answered,—looking never
Toward her face, so beautiful and strange
It grew, with feeding on the evening light,—
"The gross is given, by inscrutable God,
Power to beat wide wings upon the subtle.
Thus we ourselves, so fleshly, fallible, mortal,
Stand here, for all our foolishness, transfigured:
Hung over nothing in an arch of light;
While one more evening, like a wave of silence,
Gathers the stars together and goes out."

V

Now the great wheel of darkness and low clouds
Whirs and whirls in heaven with dipping rim;
Against the ice-white wall of light in the west
Skeleton trees bow down in a stream of air.
Leaves, black leaves and smoke, are blown on the wind;
Mount upward past my window; swoop again;
In a sharp silence, loudly, loudly falls
The first cold drop, striking a shrivelled leaf.
Doom and dusk for the earth! Upward I reach
To draw chill curtains and shut out the dark,
Pausing an instant, with uplifted hand,
To watch, between black ruined portals of cloud,
One star,—the tottering portals fall and crush it.
Here are a thousand books! here is the wisdom
Alembicked out of dust, or out of nothing;
Choose now the weightiest word, most golden page,
Most sombrely musicked line; hold up these lanterns, —

These paltry lanterns, wisdoms, philosophies,—
Above your eyes, against this wall of darkness;
And you'll see—what? One hanging strand of cobweb;
A window-sill a half-inch deep in dust.
Speak out, old wise-men! Now, if ever, we need you.
Cry loudly, lift shrill voices like magicians
Against this baleful dusk, this wail of rain!
But you are nothing. Your pages turn to water
Under my fingers: cold, cold and gleaming,
Arrowy in the darkness, rippling, dripping—
All things are rain. Myself, this lighted room,
What are we but a murmurous pool of rain?
The slow arpeggios of it, liquid, sibilant,
Thrill and thrill in the dark. World-deep I lie
Under a sky of rain. Thus lies the sea-shell
Under the rustling twilight of the sea;
No gods remember it; no understanding
Cleaves the long darkness with a sword of light.

VI

Heaven, you say, will be a field in April,
A friendly field, a long green wave of earth,
With one domed cloud above it. There you'll lie
In noon's delight, with bees to flash above you,
Drown amid buttercups that blaze in the wind,
Forgetting all save beauty. There you'll see
With sun-filled eyes your one great dome of cloud
Adding fantastic towers and spires of light,
Ascending, like a ghost, to melt in the blue.
Heaven enough, in truth, if you were there!
Could I be with you, I would choose your noon,
Drown amid buttercups, laugh with the intimate grass,
Dream there forever. . . . But, being older, sadder,
Having not you, nor aught save thought of you,
It is not spring I'll choose, but fading summer;
Not noon I'll choose, but the charmed hour of dusk.
Poppies? A few! And a moon almost as red.
But most I'll choose that subtler dusk that comes
Into the mind—into the heart, you say—
When, as we look bewildered at lovely things,

Striving to give their loveliness a name,
They are forgotten; and other things remembered,
Flower in the heart with the fragrance we call grief.

VII

In the long silence of the sea, the seaman
Strikes twice his bell of bronze. The short note wavers
And loses itself in the blue realm of water.
One sea-gull, paired with a shadow, wheels, wheels;
Circles the lonely ship by wave and trough;
Lets down his feet, strikes at the breaking water,
Draws up his golden feet, beats wings, and rises
Over the mast. Light from a crimson cloud
Crimsons the sluggishly creeping foams of waves;
The seaman, poised in the bow, rises, falls,
As the deep forefoot finds a way through waves;
And there below him, steadily gazing westward,—
Facing the wind, the sunset, the long cloud,—
The goddess of the ship, proud figurehead,
Smiles inscrutably, plunges to crying waters,
Emerges streaming, gleaming, with jewels falling
Fierily from carved wings and golden breasts;
Steadily glides a moment, then swoops again.
Carved by the hand of man, grieved by the wind;
Worn by the tumult of the tragic seas,
Yet smiling still, unchanging, smiling still
Inscrutably, with calm eyes and golden brow—
What is it that she sees and follows always,
Beyond the molten and ruined west, beyond
The light-rimmed sea, the sky itself? What secret
Gives wisdom to her purpose? Now the cloud
In final conflagration pales and crumbles
Into the darkening water. Now the stars
Burn softly through the dusk. The seaman strikes
His small lost bell again, watching the west
As she below him watches. . . . O pale goddess,
Whom not the darkness, even, or rain or storm,
Changes; whose great wings are bright with foam,
Whose breasts are cold as the sea, whose eyes forever
Inscrutably take that light whereon they look—

Speak to us! Make us certain, as you are,
That somewhere, beyond wave and wave and wave,
That dreamed-of harbour lies which we would find.

EXILE

These hills are sandy. Trees are dwarfed here. Crows
Caw dismally in skies of an arid brilliance,
Complain in dusty pine-trees. Yellow daybreak
Lights on the long brown slopes a frost-like dew,
Dew as heavy as rain; the rabbit tracks
Show sharply in it, as they might in snow.
But it's soon gone in the sun—what good does it do?
The houses, on the slope, or among brown trees,
Are grey and shrivelled. And the men who live here
Are small and withered, spider-like, with large eyes.

Bring water with you if you come to live here—
Cold tinkling cisterns, or else wells so deep
That one looks down to Ganges or Himalayas.
Yes, and bring mountains with you, white, moon-bearing,
Mountains of ice. You will have need of these
Profundities and peaks of wet and cold.

Bring also, in a cage of wire or osier,
Birds of a golden colour, who will sing
Of leaves that do not wither, watery fruits
That heavily hang on long melodious boughs
In the blue-silver forests of deep valleys.

I have now been here—how many years? Years unnumbered,
My hands grow clawlike. My eyes are large and starved.
I brought no bird with me, I have no cistern
Where I might find the moon, or river, or snow.
Some day, for lack of these, I'll spin a web
Between two dusty pine-tree tops, and hang there
Face downward, like a spider, blown as lightly
As ghost of leaf. Crows will caw about me.
Morning and evening I shall drink the dew.

SAMADHI

Take then the music; plunge in the thickest of it,—
Thickest, darkest, richest; call it a forest,
A million boles of trees, with leaves, leaves,
Golden and green, flashing like scales in the sun,
Tossed and torn in the tempest, whirling and streaming,
With the terrible sound, beneath, of boughs that crack.
. . . Again, a hush comes; and the wind's a whisper.
One leaf goes pirouetting. You stand in the dusk
In the misty shaft of light the sun flings faintly
Through planes of green; and suddenly, out of the darkest
And deepest and farthest of the forest, wavers
That golden horn, *cor anglais*, husky-timbred,
Sending through all this gloom of trees and silence
Its faint half-mute nostalgia. . . . How the soul
Flies from the dungeon of you to the very portals
To meet that sound! There, there, is the secret
Singing out of the darkness,—shining, too,
For all we know, if we could only see!
But if we steal by footpaths, warily,—
Snap not a twig, nor crush a single leaf;
Or if, in a kind of panic, like wild beasts,
We rend our violent way through vines and briars,
Crash through a coppice, tear our flesh, come bleeding
To a still pool, encircled, brooded over
By ancient trees—all's one! We reach but silence,
We find no horn, no hornsman. . . . There the beeches
Out of the lower dark of ferns and mosses
Lift, far above, their tremulous tops to the light.
Only an echo hear we of that horn,
Cor anglais, golden, husky-timbred, crying
Half-mute nostalgia from the dark of things. . . .
Then, as we stand bewildered in that wood,
With leaves above us in sibilant confusion,
And the ancient ghosts of leaves about our feet—
Listen!—the horn once more, but farther now,
Sings in the evening for a wing-beat space;
Makes the leaves murmur, as it makes the blood

Burn in the heart and all its radiant veins;
And we turn inward, to seek it once again.

Or, it's a morning in the blue portal of summer.
White shoals of little clouds, like heavenly fish,
Swim softly off the sun, who rains his light
On the vast hurrying earth. The giant poplar
Sings in the light with a thousand sensitive leaves,
Root-tip to leaf-tip he is all delight:
And, at the golden core of all that joy,
One sinister grackle with a thievish eye
Scrapes a harsh cynic comment. How he laughs,
Flaunting amid that green his coffin-colour!
We, in the garden a million miles below him,
At paltry tasks of pruning, spading, watching
Black-striped bees crawl into foxglove bells
Half-filled with dew—look! we are lightly startled
By sense or sound; are moved; lose touch with earth;
And, in the twinkling of the grackle's eye,
Swing in the infinite on a spider's cable.
What is our world? It is a poplar tree
Immense and solitary, with leaves a thousand,
Or million, countless, flashing in a light
For them alone intended. He is great,
His trunk is solid, and his roots deceive us.
We shade our eyes with hands and upward look
To see if all those leaves indeed be leaves,
So rich they are in a choiring down of joy,
Or stars. And as we stand so, small and dumb,
We hear again that harsh derisive comment,
The grackle's laughter; and again we see
His thievish eye, aware amid green boughs.
Touch earth again: take up your shovel: dig
In the wormy ground. That tree magnificent
Sways like a giant dancer in a garment
Whose gold and green are naught but tricks of light.
And at the heart of all that drunken beauty
Is a small lively cynic bird who laughs.

Who sees the vision coming? Who can tell
What moment out of time will be the seed

To root itself, as swift as lightning roots
 Into a cloud, and grow, swifter than thought,
 And flower gigantic in the infinite?
 Walk softly through your forest, and be ready
 To hear the horn of horns. Or in your garden
 Stoop, but upon your back be ever conscious
 Of sunlight, and a shadow that may grow.

POVERTY GRASS

First, blow the trumpets: call the people hither!
 Not merely in the township! Send them further.
 Set hornsmen at all cross roads: send out horsemen
 With horns, a man's length, bound in brass,
 Far to the north, the west. Bid them to blow
 Unceasing summons, shatter the air, shake leaves
 From trees decrepit. I would have the world
 Sound with a bugle music from end to end.
 Lead then the people hither, have the roads
 Black with the mass of them at night and noon.
 And when you have them, see them banked about me,
 Row behind row—(how shine already the faces!)—
 Like angels in Angelico's vision of heaven.
 Those that were horsemen first will now be ushers—
 'Stand there!' they'll cry, 'no crowding!—Those behind
 Will hear, feel, understand, as well as those
 Who rest their chins upon him, prop their elbows
 Against the coffin-lid! Stand still! be patient!
 As for the house—that must be fit as well.
 Thus, as it now stands—no! it is too meagre.
 The stage is bare. First, the approach is bad.
 The hill, behind, that for a thousand years
 Has washed its loam and leaves against these walls,—
 The hill must go. So, let a thousand axes
 Flash against bark: let fall a thousand oaks
 With all their crying birds, small scolding squirrels,
 Bees' nests and birds' nests, hornets, wasps, and snakes.

A thousand carts, then, each with a quaking tree
 Outstretched in ignominy, chained and helpless,—
 These, going hence, will be our first procession:
 We'll bear to the sea our captives. Next, an army
 With spades and picks a thousand, have them led
 To music, up the hill, and then like ants
 Devour him: gash him first, and swarm in the gash,
 Eat inward till he's maggoty with men,—
 A hollow seething shell,—and lastly, nothing.
 As for the house, its walls must be of glass.
 And no partitions! one vast room that's walled
 And roofed with clearest crystal. There at night
 We'll have great light, ten thousand flames of candles,
 Ten thousand clear-eyed flames in a crystal casket:
 The folk on the utmost hill will see, and cry
 'Look, how the moon's caught in a crystal coffin!'

And last, myself, there in that crystal coffin,
 Flooded with light, reclining half, half sitting
 Propped up amid soft silks in a little box
 Of brilliant glass, yet lidless. There I'll sit
 Like prophet at a tomb's edge, open-mouthed,
 Pale, old, obscene, white-bearded—see! my beard
 Hangs on the coffin as a snow-drift hangs
 On a wall of ice . . . And there, at last, I'll speak.

So, then! You see it clearly. It is night-time.
 The house is bright. And I,—in an open coffin
 Of glass, that's in the house, a larger coffin,—
 (That, too, in the coffin that we call the world,
 Large, airy, lucent, lighted with lights of stars,—)
 Peer from the luminous grave's-edge into darkness
 That's filled from hub to marge with staring faces.
 Beautiful! Is the world here? Let it gaze, then,
 And fill its idiot eyes to overflowing
 With a sight not known before. Step closer, kings,—
 Emperors, use your elbows as the plebs do.
 Steam, if you like, with your ambitious breath
 These walls that tell no lies. I'd have you hear me,
 You most of all; though I forget not either
 The vast grey hungry maggot-mass of men:
 The little wedge-shaped darlings, in their broth

Of carrion illusions! . . . How they rot
The air they breathe, turn the green earth to poison,
People the sky with pestilence of sick fancies!
See how the whole sky swarms with dirty wings! . . .

O Man, who so corrupt all things you feed on;
Whose meditation slimes the thing it thinks;
Vile borer into the core of the universe;
Spoiler and destroyer; you, ambitious,
Crawling upon your admirable belly
For nothing but that at last your tube-shaped mouth
Should blindly thrust and suck at the innermost heart
Of the world, or god, or infinite overthrown;
Foulest and most dishonest of all creatures;
Sole traitorous worm of all things living, you
Who crown your horrible head with a dream of glory
And call yourself a king! Come closer, hear me,
I am the prophet who, as through these walls
Of innocent glass, see all things deep and clear,
The after and before, revealed or hid:
Partly among you living, partly dead,
I see your hungry mouths, but also see
With my dead eye,—(one cold eye underground
Beneath the earth's black coffin-lid,—) the dead.
Ha! You would have my secret? You would hear
The one bright shattering trumpet whose long blast
Blows like a whirlwind myriad ghosts from tombs?
You cry to the prophet, do you, for a vision—
You'd have me, with one sombre word of magic,
Cry beauty back from dust, and set to singing
This catacomb of graves you call a world?
Press closer, kings! Swarm over me, you plebs!
Feed your rapacious eyes on me, devour
With mouths and nerves and nostrils and raw brains
This bloodless carcass that contains your secret:
Have out my heart, hold up above it candles,
Pass it among you, squeak and growl and jabber,
Stamp it beneath your feet—it's an old leaf
Will turn to a little dust . . . For there's the wonder!
I am but poverty grass; a dry grey weed;
A trifling dusty moss, fine-branched as coral—;

One footstep makes it powder. And my secret,—
 Which all my horsemen brought you here to learn,—
 Is nought but this: this singing world of yours
 Is but a heap of bones. Sound once the trumpet
 And you shall see them, tier upon tier, profound
 As God himself! Sound twice the trumpet, then,
 And I shall add my bone or two. And after,
 At the third blast, will all these lights puff out,—
 And you may grope in the darkness, as you came.
 Sound the bright horn. Shut, coffin! I am dead.

PSYCHOMACHIA

I

Tent-caterpillars, as you see, (he said)
 Have nested in these cherry-trees, and stripped
 All sound of leaves from them. You see their webs
 Like broken harp-strings, of a fairy kind,
 Shine in the moonlight.

And then I to him:
 But is this why, when all the houses sleep,
 You meet me here,—to tell me only this,
 That caterpillars weave their webs in trees?
 This road I know. I have walked many times
 These sandy ruts. I know these starveling trees,
 Their gestures of stiff agony in winter,
 And the sharp conscious pain that gnaws them now.
 But there is mystery, a message learned,
 A word flung down from nowhere, caught by you,
 And hither brought for me. How shines that word,
 From what star comes it? . . . This is what I seek.

And he in answer: Can you hear the blood
 Cry out like jangled bells from all these twigs;
 Or feel the ghosts of blossom touch your face?
 Walk you amid these trees as one who walks

Upon a field where lie the newly slain
And those who darkly die? And hear you crying?
Flesh here is torn from flesh. The tongue's plucked out.
What speech then would you have, where speech is tongueless,
And nothing, nothing, but a welling up of pain?

I answered: You may say these smitten trees,
Being leafless, have no tongues and cannot speak.
How comforts that my question? . . . You have come,
I know, as you come always, with a meaning.
What, then, is in your darkness of hurt trees;
What bird, sequestered in that wilderness
Of inarticulate pain, wrong ill-endured,
And death not understood, but bides his time
To sing a piercing phrase? Why sings he not?
I am familiar, long, with pain and death,
Endure as all do, lift dumb eyes to question
Uncomprehended wounds; I have my forest
Of injured trees, whose bare twigs show the moon
Their shameful floating webs; and I have walked,
As now we walk, to listen there to bells
Of pain, bubbles of blood, and ached to feel
The ghosts of blossom pass. But is there not
The mystery, the fugitive shape that sings
A sudden beauty there that comes like peace?

You know this road, he said, and how it leads
Beyond starved trees to bare grey poverty grass;
Then lies the marsh beyond, and then the beach,
With dry curled waves of sea-weed, and the sea.
There, in the fog, you hear the row-locks thump,
And there you see the fisherman come in
From insubstantial nothing to a shore
As dim and insubstantial. He is old,
His boat is old and grey, the oars are worn.
You know this,—you have seen this?

And then I:

I know, have seen this, and have felt the shore
As dim and thin as mist; and I have wondered
That it upheld me, did not let me fall

Through nothing into nothing . . . And the oars,
Worn down like human nerves against the world;
And the worn road that leads to sleeping houses
And weeping trees. But is this all you say?
For there is mystery, a word you have
That shines within your mind. Now speak that word.

And he in answer: So you have the landscape
With all its nerves and voices. It is yours.
Do with it what you will. But never try
To go away from it, for that is death.
Dwell in it, know its houses, and cursed trees,
And call it sorrow. Is this not enough?
Love you not shameful webs? It is enough.
There is no need for bird, or sudden peace.

II

The plain no herbage had, but all was bare
And swollen livid sand in ridges heaped;
And in the sharp cold light that filled the east
Beneath one cloud that was a bird with wings
I saw a figure shape itself, as whirling
It took up sand and moved across the sand.
A man it was, and here and there he ran
Beating his arms, now falling, rising now,
Struggling, for so it seemed, against the air.
But, as I watched, the cloud that was a bird
Lifted its wings; and the white light intense
Poured down upon him. Then I saw him, naked,
Amid that waste, at war with a strange beast
Or monster, many-armed and ever-changing;
That now was like an octopus of air,
Now like a spider with a woman's hair
And woman's hands, and now was like a vine
That wrapped him round with leaves and sudden flowers,
And now was like a huge white thistledown
Floating; and with this changing shape he fought
Furious and exhausted, till at length
I saw him fall upon it in the sand
And strangle it. Its tentacles of leaves

Fell weakly downward from his back, its flowers
Turned black. And then, as he had whirled at first,
So whirled he now again, and with his feet
Drew out the sand, and made a pit, and flung
The scorpion-woman-vine therein, and heaped
The sand above.

And then I heard him sing
And saw him dance; and all that swollen plain
Where no herb grew, became a paradise
Of flowers, and smoking grass, and blowing trees
That shook out birds and song of birds. And he
In power and beauty shining like a demon
Danced there, until that cloud that was a bird
Let fall its wings and darkened him, and hid
The shining fields. But still for long I heard
His voice, and bird-song bells about him chiming,
And knew him dancing there above that grave.

III

Said he: Thus draw your secret sorrow forth,
Whether it wear a woman's face or not;
Walk there at dusk beside that grove of trees,
And sing, and she will come. For while she haunts
Your shameful wood with all its webs and wounds
And darkly broods and works her mischief there,
No peace you'll have, but snares, and poisonous flowers
And trees in lamentation. Call her out
As memory cries the white ghost from the tomb.
Play the sharp lyric flute, for that she loves,
With topaz phrases for her vanity.

And I in answer: She is dear to me,
Dearer that in my mind she makes a dark
Of woods and rocks and thorns and venomous flowers.
What matter that I seldom see her face,
Or have her beauty never? She is there,
It is her voice I hear in cries of trees.
This may be misery, but it is blest.

Then he: And when you have her, strongly take
 Her protean fiery body and lithe arms
 And wailing mouth and growing vines of hair
 And leaves that turn to hands, and bear her forth
 Into that landscape that is rightly yours
 And dig a grave for her, and thrust her in
 All writhing, and so cover her with earth.
 Then will the two, as should be, fuse in one.
 The landscape, that was dead, will straightway shine
 And sing and flower about you, trees will grow
 Where desert was, water will flash from dust,
 And rocks grow out in leaves. And you, this grief
 Torn from your heart and planted in your world,
 Will know yourself at peace.

But will it be,—

I asked,—as bright a joy to see that landscape
 Put on diffused her wonder, sing her name,
 Burn with the vital secret of her body
 There locked in earth like fire, as now to have
 Her single beauty fugitive in my mind?
 If she is lost, will flowering rocks give peace?

And he in answer: So you have the landscape
 With all her nerves and voices . . . She is yours.

CHIAROSCURO: ROSE

HE

Fill your bowl with roses: the bowl, too, have of crystal.
 Sit at the western window. Take the sun
 Between your hands like a ball of flaming crystal,
 Poise it to let it fall, but hold it still,
 And meditate on the beauty of your existence;
 The beauty of this, that you exist at all.

SHE

The sun goes down,—but without lamentation.
I close my eyes, and the stream of my sensation
In this, at least, grows clear to me:
Beauty is a word that has no meaning.
Beauty is naught to me.

HE

The last blurred raindrops fall from the half-clear sky,
Eddying lightly, rose-tinged, in the windless wake of the sun.
The swallow ascending against cold walls of cloud
Seems winging upward over huge bleak stairs of stone.
The raindrop finds its way to the heart of the leaf-bud.
But no word finds its way to the heart of you.

SHE

This also is clear in the stream of my sensation:
That I am content, for the moment . . . Let me be.
How light the new grass looks with the rain-dust on it!
But heart is a word that has no meaning,
Heart means nothing to me.

HE

To the end of the world I pass and back again
In flights of the mind; yet always find you here,
Remote, pale, unattached . . . O Circe too-clear-eyed,
Watching amused your fawning tiger-thoughts,
Your wolves, your grotesque apes—relent, relent!
Be less wary for once: it is the evening.

SHE

But if I close my eyes what howlings greet me!
Do not persuade. Be tranquil. Here is flesh
With all its demons. Take it, sate yourself.
But leave my thoughts to me.

KING BORBORIGMI

You say you heard King Borborigmi laugh?
Say how it was. Some heavenly body moved him?
The moon laughed first? Dark earth put up a finger
Of honeysuckle, through his moonlit window,
And tickled him?

—King Borborigmi laughed
Alone, walking alone in an empty room,
Thinking, and yet not thinking, seeing, yet blind.
One hand was on his chin, feeling the beard
That razors could not stay; the other groped;
For it was dark, and in the dark were chairs;
Midnight, or almost midnight; Aldebaran
Hanging among the dews.

—King Borborigmi
Laughed once or twice at nothing, just as midnight
Released a flock of bells?

—Not this alone;
Not bells in flight toward Aldebaran;
Nor the immitigable beard; nor dews
Heavily pattering on the pent-house roof;
Nor chairs in shadow which his foot disturbed.
Yet it was all of these, and more: the air
Twirling the curtain where a red moth hung:
The one bell flying later than the others
Into the starstrung silence: the garden breaking
To let a thousand seedlings have their way:
An eye-tooth aching, and the pendulum
That heavily ticked upon the leftward swing.

—These trifles woke the laughter of a king?

—Much less than these, and more! He softly stepped
Among the webby world, and felt it shudder.
Under the earth—a strand or two of web—
He saw his father's bones, fallen apart,

The jawbone sunken and the skull caved in.
 Among his mother's bones a cactus rooted,
 And two moles crept, and ants held carnival.
 Above the obscene tomb an aloe blossomed;
 Dew glistened on the marble. This he saw,
 And at the selfsame moment heard the cook
 Wind the alarm-clock in her bedroom, yawn,
 And creak the bed. And it was then, surprised,
 He touched a chair, and laughed, and twitched the curtain,—
 And the moth flew out.

—Alas, poor Borborigmi,
 That it should be so little, and so sorry
 A thing to make him laugh!

—Young Borborigmi,
 Saw more than this. The infinite octopus
 With eyes of chaos and long arms of stars,
 And belly of void and darkness, became clear
 About him, and he saw himself embraced
 And swept along a vein, with chairs and teeth,
 Houses and bones and gardens, cooks and clocks;
 The midnight bell, a snoring cook, and he,
 Mingled and flowed like atoms.

—It was this
 That made him laugh—to see himself as one
 Corpuscle in the infinite octopus? . . .
 And was this all, old fool, old turner of leaves? . . .

—Alone, thinking alone in an empty room
 Where moonlight and the mouse were met together,
 And pulse and clock together ticked, and dew
 Made contrapuntal patter, Borborigmi
 Fathomed in his own viscera the world,
 Went downward, sounding like a diver, holding
 His peaked nose; and when he came up, laughed.
 These things and others saw. But last of all,
 Ultimate or penultimate, he saw
 The one thing that undid him!

—What was this?

The one grotesquer thing among grotesques?
 Carrion, offal, or the toothbrush ready
 For carnal fangs? Cancer, that grasps the heart,
 Or fungus, whitely swelling in the brain?
 Some gargoyle of the thought?

—King Borborigmi,

Twitching the curtain as the last bell flew
 Melodious to Aldebaran, beheld
 The moth fly also. Downward dropped it softly
 Among dropped petals, white. And there one rose
 Was open in the moonlight! Dew was on it;
 The bat, with ragged wing, cavorting, sidling,
 Snapped there a sleeping bee—

—And crunched the moth? . . .

—It was the rose in moonlight, crimson, yet
 Blanched by the moon; the bee asleep; the bat
 And fallen moth—but most the guileless rose.
 Guileless! . . . King Borborigmi struck his foot
 Against a chair, and saw the guileless rose
 Joining himself (King Bubblegut), and all
 Those others—the immitigable beard;
 Razors and teeth; his mother's bones; the tomb:
 The yawning cook; the clock; the dew; the bells
 Bursting upward like bubbles—; all so swept
 Along one vein of the infinite octopus
 With eyes of chaos and long arms of stars
 And belly of void and darkness. It was then
 He laughed; as he would never laugh again.
 For he saw everything; and, in the centre
 Of corrupt change, one guileless rose; and laughed
 For puzzlement and sorrow.

Ah, poor man,

Poor Borborigmi, young, to be so wise!

—Wise? No. For what he laughed at was just this:
 That to see all, to know all, is to rot.

So went to bed; and slept; is sleeping still,
If none has waked him.

—Dead? King Borborigmi
Is dead? Died laughing? Sleeps a dreamless sleep
Till cook's alarm clock wakes him?

—Sleeps like Hamlet,
King of infinite space in a walnut shell—
But has bad dreams; I fear he has bad dreams.

AND IN THE HANGING GARDENS

And in the hanging gardens there is rain
From midnight until one, striking the leaves
And bells of flowers, and stroking boles of planes,
And drawing slow arpeggios over pools,
And stretching strings of sound from eaves to ferns.
The princess reads. The knave of diamonds sleeps.
The king is drunk, and flings a golden goblet
Down from the turret window (curtained with rain)
Into the lilacs.

And at one o'clock
The vulcan under the garden wakes and beats
The gong upon his anvil. Then the rain
Ceases, but gently ceases, dripping still,
And sound of falling water fills the dark
As leaves grow bold and upright, and as eaves
Part with water. The princess turns the page
Beside the candle, and between two braids
Of golden hair. And reads: "From there I went
Northward a journey of four days, and came
To a wild village in the hills, where none
Was living save the vulture and the rat,
And one old man, who laughed, but could not speak.
The roofs were fallen in; the well grown over
With weed; and it was there my father died.

Then eight days further, bearing slightly west,
The cold wind blowing sand against our faces,
The food tasting of sand. And as we stood
By the dry rock that marks the highest point
My brother said: 'Not too late is it yet
To turn, remembering home.' And we were silent
Thinking of home." The princess shuts her eyes
And feels the tears forming beneath her eyelids
And opens them, and tears fall on the page.
The knave of diamonds in the darkened room
Throws off his covers, sleeps, and snores again.
The king goes slowly down the turret stairs
To find the goblet.

And at two o'clock

The vulcan in his smithy underground
Under the hanging gardens, where the drip
Of rain among the clematis and ivy
Still falls from sipping flower to purple flower,
Smites twice his anvil, and the murmur comes
Among the roots and vines. The princess reads:
"As I am sick, and cannot write you more,
Nor have not long to live, I give this letter
To him, my brother, who will bear it south
And tell you how I died. Ask how it was,
There in the northern desert, where the grass
Was withered, and the horses, all but one,
Perished" . . . The princess drops her golden head
Upon the page between her two white arms
And golden braids. The knave of diamonds wakes
And at his window in the darkened room
Watches the lilacs tossing, where the king
Seeks for the goblet.

And at three o'clock

The moon inflames the lilac heads, and thrice
The vulcan, in his root-bound smithy, clangs
His anvil; and the sounds creep softly up
Among the vines and walls. The moon is round,
Round as a shield above the turret top.
The princess blows her candle out, and weeps

In the pale room, where scent of lilac comes,
 Weeping, with hands across her eyelids, thinking
 Of withered grass, withered by sandy wind.
 The knave of diamonds, in his darkened room,
 Holds in his hands a key, and softly steps
 Along the corridor, and slides the key
 Into the door that guards her. Meanwhile, slowly,
 The king, with raindrops on his beard and hands,
 And dripping sleeves, climbs up the turret stairs,
 Holding the goblet upright in one hand;
 And pauses on the midmost step, to taste
 One drop of wine, wherewith wild rain has mixed.

THE WEDDING

At noon, Tithonus, withered by his singing,
 Climbing the oatstalk with his hairy legs,
 Met grey Arachne, poisoned and shrunk down
 By her own beauty; pride had shrivelled both.
 In the white web—where seven flies hung wrapped—
 She heard his footstep; hurried to him; bound him;
 Enshrouded him in silk; then poisoned him.
 Twice shrieked Tithonus, feebly; then was still.
 Arachne loved him. Did he love Arachne?
 She watched him with red eyes, venomous sparks,
 And the furred claws outspread . . . "O sweet Tithonus!
 Darling! Be kind, and sing that song again!
 Shake the bright web again with that deep fiddling!
 Are you much poisoned? sleeping? do you dream?
 Darling Tithonus!"

And Tithonus, weakly
 Moving one hairy shin against the other
 Within the silken sack, contrived to fiddle
 A little tune, half-hearted: "Shrewd Arachne!
 Whom pride in beauty withered to this shape
 As pride in singing shrivelled me to mine—

Unwrap me, let me go—and let me limp,
With what poor strength your venom leaves me, down
This oatstalk, and away.”

Arachne, angry,
Stung him again, twirling him with rough paws,
The red eyes keen. “What! You would dare to leave me?
Unkind Tithonus! Sooner I’ll kill and eat you
Than let you go. But sing that tune again—
So plaintive was it!”

And Tithonus faintly
Moved the poor fiddles, which were growing cold,
And sang: “Arachne, goddess envied of gods,
Beauty’s eclipse eclipsed by angry beauty,
Have pity, do not ask the withered heart
To sing too long for you! My strength goes out,
Too late we meet for love. O be content
With friendship, which the noon sun once may kindle
To give one flash of passion, like a dewdrop,
Before it goes! . . . Be reasonable,—Arachne!”

Arachne heard the song grow weaker, dwindle
To first a rustle, and then half a rustle,
And last a tick, so small no ear could hear it
Save hers, a spider’s ear. And her small heart,
(Rusted away, like his, to a pinch of dust,)
Gleamed once, like his, and died. She clasped him tightly
And sunk her fangs in him. Tithonus dead,
She slept awhile, her last sensation gone;
Woke from the nap, forgetting him; and ate him.

GOD'S ACRE

In Memory Of. In Fondest Recollection Of.
In Loving Memory Of. In Fond
Remembrance. Died in October. Died at Sea.
Who died at sea? The name of the seaport

Escapes her, gone, blown with the eastwind, over
 The tombs and yews, into the apple orchard,
 Over the road, where gleams a wagon-top,
 And gone. The eastwind gallops up from sea
 Bringing salt and gulls. The marsh smell, too,
 Strong in September; mud and reeds, the reeds
 Rattling like bones.

She shifts the grass-clipper
 From right to left hand, clips and clips the grass.
 The broken column, carefully broken, on which
 The blackbird hen is laughing—in fondest memory.
 Burden! Who was this Burden, to be remembered?
 Or Potter? The Potter rejected by the Pot.
 "Here lies Josephus Burden, who departed
 This life the fourth of August, nineteen hundred.
 'And He Said Come'." Josephus Burden, forty,
 Gross, ribald, with strong hands on which grew hair,
 And red ears kinked with hair, and northblue eyes,
 Held in one hand a hammer, in the other
 A nail. He drove the nail. . . . This was enough?
 Or—also—did he love?

She changes back
 The clipper. The blades are dull. The grass is wet
 And gums the blades. In Loving Recollection.
 Four chains, heavy, hang round the vault. What chance
 For skeletons? The dead men rise at night,
 Rattle the links. "Too heavy! can't be budged . . .
 Try once again—together—NOW! . . . no use."
 They sit in moonless shadow, gently talking.
 "Old Jones it must have been, who made those chains.
 I'd like to see him lift them now!" . . . The owl
 That hunts in Wickham Wood comes over, mewing.
 "An owl," says one. "Most likely," says another.
 They turn grey heads.

The seawind brings a breaking
 Bell sound among the yews and tombstones, ringing
 The twisted whorls of bronze on sunlit stones.
 Sacred . . . memory . . . affectionate . . . O God

What travesty is this—the blackbird soils
 The broken column; the worm at work in the skull
 Feasts on medulla; and the lewd thrush cracks
 A snailshell on the vault. He died on shipboard—
 Sea-burial, then, were better?

On her knees

She clips and clips, kneeling against the sod,
 Holding the world between her two knees, pondering
 Downward, as if her thought, like men or apples,
 Fell ripely into earth. Seablue, her eyes
 Turn to the sea. Sea-gulls are scavengers,
 Cruel of face, but lovely. By the dykes
 The reeds rattle, leaping in eastwind, rattling
 Like bones. In Fond Remembrance Of. O God,
 That life is what it is, and does not change.
 You there in earth, and I above you kneeling.
 You dead, and I alive.

She prods a plantain

Of too ambitious root. That largest yew-tree,
 Clutching the hill—

She rises from stiff knees,

Stiffly, and treads the pebble path, that leads
 Downward, to sea and town. The marsh smell comes
 Healthy and salt, and fills her nostrils. Reeds
 Dance in the eastwind, rattling; warblers dart
 Flashing, from swaying reed to reed, and sing.

THE ROAD

Three then came forward out of darkness, one
 An old man bearded, his old eyes red with weeping,
 A peasant, with hard hands. "Come now," he said,
 "And see the road, for which our people die.
 Twelve miles of road we've made, a little only,
 Westward winding. Of human blood and stone
 We build; and in a thousand years will come
 Beyond the hills to sea."

I went with them,
Taking a lantern, which upon their faces
Showed years and grief; and in a time we came
To the wild road which wound among wild hills
Westward; and so along this road we stooped,
Silent, thinking of all the dead men, there
Compounded with sad clay. Slowly we moved:
For they were old and weak, had given all
Their life, to build this twelve poor miles of road,
Muddy, under the rain. And in my hand
Turning the lantern, here or there, I saw
Deep holes of water where the raindrop splashed,
And rainfilled footprints in the grass, and heaps
Of broken stone, and rusted spades and picks,
And helves of axes. And the old man spoke,
Holding my wrist: "Three hundred years it took
To build these miles of road: three hundred years;
And human lives unnumbered. But the day
Will come when it is done." Then spoke another,
One not so old, but old, whose face was wrinkled:
"And when it comes, our people will all sing
For joy, passing from east to west, or west
To east, returning, with the light behind them;
All meeting in the road and singing there."
And the third said: "The road will be their life;
A heritage of blood. Grief will be in it,
And beauty out of grief. And I can see
How all the women's faces will be bright.
In that time, laughing, they will remember us.
Blow out your lantern now, for day is coming."

My lantern blown out, in a little while
We climbed in long light up a hill, where climbed
The dwindling road, and ended in a field.
Peasants were working in the field, bowed down
With unrewarded work, and grief, and years
Of pain. And as we passed them, one man fell
Into a furrow that was bright with water
And gave a cry that was half cry half song—
"The road . . . the road . . . the road . . ." And all then fell
Upon their knees and sang.

We four passed on

Over the hill, to westward. Then I felt
How tears ran down my face, tears without number;
And knew that all my life henceforth was weeping,
Weeping, thinking of human grief, and human
Endeavour fruitless in a world of pain.
And when I held my hands up they were old;
I knew my face would not be young again.

DEAD LEAF IN MAY

One skeleton-leaf, white-ribbed, a last year's leaf,
Skipped in a paltry gust, whizzed from the dust,
Leapt the small dusty puddle; and sailing then
Merrily in the sunlight, lodged itself
Between two blossoms in a hawthorn tree.
That was the moment: and the world was changed.
With that insane gay skeleton of a leaf
A world of dead worlds flew to hawthorn trees,
Lodged in the green forks, rattled, rattled their ribs
(As loudly as a dead leaf's ribs can rattle)
Blithely, among bees and blossoms. I cursed,
I shook my stick, dislodged it. To what end?
Its ribs, and all the ribs of all dead worlds,
Would house them now forever as death should:
Cheek by jowl with May.

That was the moment: and my brain flew open
Like a ripe bursting pod. The seed sprang out,
And I was withered, and had given all.
Ripeness at top means rottenness beneath:
The brain divulging seed, the heart is empty:
The little blood goes through it like quicksilver:
The hand is leather, and the world is lost.

Human, who trudge the road from Here to There:
Lock the dry oak-leaf's flimsy skeleton

In auricle or ventricle; sail it
Like a gay ship down red Aorta's flood.
Be the paired blossoms with dead ribs between.
Thirst in the There, that you may drink the Here.

CLIFF MEETING

Met on the westworn cliff, where the short grass
Blew on the sea-rock edge, with crowded sea-pinks
And heather, she and I stood face to face,
Strangers, and stared. What's in a face or eye
That gives its secret, when the moment comes,
For nothing, less than nothing? We but looked,
Looked once, looked hard, looked deep; the sea-wind spared
The blue still waters of her soul; far down
I saw the ghost I loved. Did she see also,
In my wan eyes, a depth, and a swimming ghost?
Tranced so at cliff's-edge, stood and stared; then laughed;
Then sat together in chilly sunlight, watching
The moving brows of foam come round the headland,
And rabbits daring the cliff.

Her hand, in grass—
(A sea-pink nodded betwixt thumb and finger)
I touched and lifted: she but smiled. Her arm
I scratched with a tiny fork of heather, drawing
A pair of furrows from elbow down to wrist,
White and sharp; she smiled at first, then frowned.
Her mouth, which said no word and gave no name,
I kissed; and as I kissed it, with eyes open,
I saw the sea-pink (caught twixt thumb and finger)
Plucked up unmercifully.

The sun went down
Between two waves; and as it went, she rose,
Shaking her dress. To-morrow (so she said)
Here by the cliff's-edge we might meet again.
What's in a face or eye that gives its secret

So lightly, when the moment comes? She saw
Weariness in me, love gone down like the sun,
The fleet ghost gone; and as she saw, she drooped.
Beauty waned out of her; the light drained out
From her deep eyes; pathetic seemed she; I
Discomfited, leering upon her, angry
That I had thought I loved her. So, she went:
Miserable, small, self-pitying, down to darkness.
I watched her go, thinking it strange that she—
Meagre, unlovely—should have captured me.

And on the morrow, when she did not come,
There by the cliff's edge, staked, I found a letter
Mystic, insoluble, with few words written,
Saying—(and it was strange, and like a dream,
For, as I read, the words seemed only marks
Of bird-claws in the sand—) that she was gone
Down to the village, darkness, gone forever;
But left this bird for me, that I might know—
What I should know. And in the short grass lay,
There with the sea-pinks, a blue cormorant,
White eyelids closed, and dying. Her I lifted
Between my hands, and laid against my breast,
Striving to warm her heart. The bird was starved;
The eyes drooped open, and the livid beak
Opened a little; and I gave my hands
To her to eat, having no other food;
Thrusting a finger in the beak, that she
Might eat my flesh and live. But she was dying,
And could not move the purple beak, falling
Against my hand, inert; and then I thought
That, seeking to make her eat, I did but hasten
Her death. For in a moment, then, she died.

Along the cliff I walked, taking the bird,
Holding it in my hands. . . . What had she meant
In leaving this blue cormorant for me?
Was she not coming? Everywhere I looked;
By rock and tree; in coigns of heather; even
Down where the moving brows of foam came in.
Nowhere—nowhere. The sun went west behind

Two waves. It was the hour of parting. Would
She come not now for that?

The darkness gathered.
The sea-pinks lost their colour. And I walked
Along the cliff's-edge, losing all power of thought,
Taking the cormorant into the dark with me.

SEA HOLLY

Begotten by the meeting of rock with rock,
The mating of rock and rock, rocks gnashing together;
Created so, and yet forgetful, walks
The seaward path, puts up her left hand, shades
Blue eyes, the eyes of rock, to see better
In slanting light the ancient sheep (which kneels
Biting the grass) the while her other hand,
Hooking the wicker handle, turns the basket
Of eggs. The sea is high to-day. The eggs
Are cheaper. The sea is blown from the southwest,
Confused, taking up sand and mud in waves,
The waves break, sluggish, in brown foam, the wind
Disperses (on the sheep and hawthorn) spray,—
And on her cheeks, the cheeks engendered of rock,
And eyes, the colour of rock. The left hand
Falls from the eyes, and undecided slides
Over the left breast on which muslin lightly
Rests, touching the nipple, and then down
The hollow side, virgin as rock, and bitterly
Caresses the blue hip.

It was for this,
This obtuse taking of the seaward path,
This stupid hearing of larks, this hooking
Of wicker, this absent observation of sheep
Kneeling in harsh sea-grass, the cool hand shading
The spray-stung eyes—it was for this the rock
Smote itself. The sea is higher today,

And eggs are cheaper. The eyes of rock take in
 The seaward path that winds toward the sea,
 The thistle-prodder, old woman under a bonnet,
 Forking the thistles, her back against the sea,
 Pausing, with hard hands on the handle, peering
 With rock eyes from her bonnet.

It was for this,
 This rock-lipped facing of brown waves, half sand
 And half water, this tentative hand that slides
 Over the breast of rock, and into the hollow
 Soft side of muslin rock, and then fiercely
 Almost as rock against the hip of rock—
 It was for this in midnight the rocks met,
 And dithered together, cracking and smoking.

It was for this
 Barren beauty, barrenness of rock that aches
 On the seaward path, seeing the fruitful sea,
 Hearing the lark of rock that sings, smelling
 The rock-flower of hawthorn, sweetness of rock—
 It was for this, stone pain in the stony heart,
 The rock loved and laboured; and all is lost.

ELDER TREE

"The sensual will have its moment? The brain
 Sleep? . . . You can prophesy? . . ."

—Thus laughed the woman,
 Tall, thin, and bitter as an elder tree,
 Lifting her white face like a crown of bloom.
 And so I swore by darkness, trees, and blood,
 And rivers underground, and felt my brain,
 (Thus challenged by her brain) fall steeply down
 Like a dead leaf upon the rushing flood.
 "Yes, I can prophesy," I laughed in answer;
 And lost my life in hers, which brighter shone,

Radiant and derisive. "Never yet,"
She darkly smiled, "has voice of man flown in
To break my chords of being. You but waste
The evening, with its bank of clouds, where stars
Plunge down to swim . . . Look, how the lights now come
Like perforations in that wall of trees—
Wherethrough the Ultimate winks!" . . .

And she was still,
Clasping long hands around her lifted knee.
These touched I twice, with teasing finger-tip,
Three times and four, then wearied. But the darkness
And that profounder sound where rushed the river,
Nocturnal, under all, and moving all,—
Took both of us, annulled the brain, devoured
The elder tree, with white faint face of bloom,
And me, who sat beneath it.

Then my blood
Was filled with elder blossom cold and white,
My arms embraced the tree of singing wood,
My hands took leaves and broke them. We were lost,
Thus mingled, in the world. No speech we had.
Till suddenly (as at the end of death,
The darkness being silent) we stood up
Once more; the woman hushed, an elder tree,
And I a voice. And then she smiled, and said—
"Ah, it is true! The sensual has its moment.
The trickster brain—thank God—can be deposed . . ."

Then I, "Look now! how all the trees rush back
From the dark stream! and every blade of grass
New-washed in starlight!"

"Starlight?" . . . She laughed, rustling,—
Rustling, nodding her elder-blossom face,—
"Not starlight, no! The trees, the grass, the brain,
Come back again from blood; and they are strong."

THE ROOM

Through that window—all else being extinct
Except itself and me—I saw the struggle
Of darkness against darkness. Within the room
It turned and turned, dived downward. Then I saw
How order might—if chaos wished—become:
And saw the darkness crush upon itself,
Contracting powerfully; it was as if
It killed itself: slowly: and with much pain.
Pain. The scene was pain, and nothing but pain.
What else, when chaos draws all forces inward
To shape a single leaf? . . .

For the leaf came,
Alone and shining in the empty room;
After a while the twig shot downward from it;
And from the twig a bough; and then the trunk,
Massive and coarse; and last the one black root.
The black root cracked the walls. Boughs burst the window:
The great tree took possession.

Tree of trees!
Remember (when time comes) how chaos died
To shape the shining leaf. Then turn, have courage,
Wrap arms and roots together, be convulsed
With grief, and bring back chaos out of shape.
I will be watching then as I watch now.
I will praise darkness now, but then the leaf.

SOUND OF BREAKING

Why do you cry out, why do I like to hear you
Cry out, here in the dewless evening, sitting
Close, close together, so close that the heart stops beating
And the brain its thought? Wordless, worthless mortals
Stumbling, exhausted, in this wilderness

Of our conjoint destruction! Hear the grass
Raging about us! Hear the worms applaud!
Hear how the ripples make a sound of chaos!
Hear now, in these and the other sounds of evening,
The first brute step of God!

About your elbow,
Making a ring of thumb and finger, I
Slide the walled blood against the less-walled blood,
Move down your arm, surmount the wrist-bone, shut
Your long slim hand in mine. Each finger-tip
Is then saluted by a finger-tip;
The hands meet back to back, then face to face;
Then lock together. And we, with eyes averted,
Smile at the evening sky of alabaster,
See nothing, lose our souls in the maelstrom, turning
Downward in rapid circles.

Bitter woman,
Bitter of heart and brain and blood, bitter as I
Who drink your bitterness—can this be beauty?
Do you cry out because the beauty is cruel?
Terror, because we downward sweep so swiftly?
Terror of darkness?

It is a sound of breaking,
The world is breaking, the world is a sound of breaking,
Many-harmonied, diverse, profound,
A shattering beauty. See, how together we break,
Hear what a crashing of disordered chords and discords
Fills the world with falling, when we thus lean
Our two mad bodies together!

It is a sound
Of everlasting grief, the sound of weeping,
The sound of disaster and misery, the sound
Of passionate heartbreak at the centre of the world.

AN OLD MAN WEEPING

How can she say this misery? A hand
Of gold, with fingers of brass, plucking
At random, murderously and harshly, among
The stretched strings of the soul? A hand cruel
Yet loved? Deep in the soul it plunges
Twanging and snapping; murderous graceful hand
On which she fawns and weeps.

And yet not this
Nor nothing like this. It is a burning tree
Grotesque of shape, yet many-leaved, wherethrough
The wind makes melody.

Nor yet this,
It is a music powerful and visible
Shaped like an octopus, each arm a beak,
Each beak a murder.

Nor yet this, but love
Taloned, with red on talons, and redder mouth,
Singing and striking.

You, through whom love comes,
Hideous, gaunt, large-boned, arid of face,
Ravaged by sorrow—say why it is that love
Flies to you as the bat flies to its cavern!
Hated woman of wormwood, body steeped
In Lethe, tasting of death!

The carven priest
Gilded and small, with one gilt hand uplifted
And gilded forehead smooth, and coronet
Gilded, and the black eyelashes lowered
To hide the eyes, and passive suffering mouth,
Woodenly murmurs: Tao, the way, the way,
The region Way!

And the red crusted bowl
Shaped by the fleeing potter, eyes intent
On dragons, cries—Give form to formless, shape
The flying chaos!

And last the imprisoned blood,
Pouring darkly from cell to cell of the heart,
Upseethes: Go near her, break her walls down, pour
Blood into blood, embed your brain in hers,
Root your gross thought in her no-less-gross thought!
Music with music mingles, be you music
Mingled, let the dissonance, clashed and dissolved,
Pierce with reality the too-smooth song!

(. . . Thus looked she at me on a summer evening
With cornflower eyes, sad brow, and aging mouth,
And smiled askance, miserable, dumb, ashamed,
And moved the pathetic bones toward me sadly,
And locked me in her heart, as one might lock
An old man, weeping, in a rusted cage.)

ELECTRA

I

The little princess, on her eleventh birthday,
Trapped a blue butterfly in a net of gauze,
Where it was sunning on a speckled stone.
The blue wings fluttered in the silkworm net.
"What voice, Blue Butterfly," (the Princess cried)
"Is voice of butterfly? . . . You scream in fury
Close to my ear; yet hear I not a sound."
She caught it down against the stone, and pressed
A royal finger on each round blue wing;
And as one tears apart a folded leaf
By pushing right and left, so tore she, smiling,
The azure fly. . . . Her eyes were bright and blue,

Her teeth were sharp; the sunlight streaked her hair
With twining gold along two braids. She frowned
As might a chemist at a test-tube-drop
(Bright, poisonous and pendent) when she saw
Cerulean dust upon each finger tip.
This, being rubbed against a tulip-mouth,
(A gluttoned bee dislodged) she sat demurely:
Opened her book, on which leaf-shadows winked;
And blew a dart toward a scarlet bird
In bright green tropics of the Amazon.

II

Dressing the naked doll of redded wax,
(The white cheeks rouged) she feather-stitched a square
Of scarlet silk with golden staggering stitches;
Chain-lightninged all its edges. After this,
A square of azure silk, a square of purple,
Superimposed; and then a tinfoil crown,
Massive, of divers colours; this, compounded
(Relics of Beaune, of Jerez, and Oporto)
Blazed the wax brow. A bed of cottonwool
Was smoothed; and thrice-anointed Ferdinand
(First pressed against her thigh for nourishment)
Was covered with a soiled green handkerchief
And closed his eyes: exchanging glass for wax.

This was the seventh year. Between the eighth
And ninth, the form of nourishment was changed.
The doll was clasped between her knees. She held
A knife in one hand, while the other lifted
A paper bird. The neck of this was severed.
And Ferdinand had passed from milk to blood.

III

"Your soul" (so said her father in the spring
That brought her sixteenth year) "turns smaller, as
Your body waxes to ripe beauty. Dwarfs
(As you have seen in circuses, or tumbling
Through scarlet-papered hoops, at vaudeville)

Bear on the brow, though mouth and eyes be fair,
A drawn and arid look, of suffering.
Dwarfed, and as blue and arid, peers the soul
Like a starved nymph from your bright eyes. Your mouth
Though beautiful, and, yes, desirable,—
(Even to me, who like a wizard shaped it),—
Is much too red; too cruelly downward curved,
It hides a tooth too sharp. You will do murder—
Laughing and weeping; hear the song of blood;
The gnome in you will laugh; the nymph will weep.”

She locked strong hands around his neck and kissed him;
Lifting a naked knee to press him subtly
She hurt him consciously; kissed till he laughed;
Unlocked her hands, then, sobered; moved away;
Shook down the golden skirt; whistled a tune;
And read the morning paper, coiled like a cat.

IV

“Under this water-lily knee” (she said)
“Blood intricately flows, corpuscle creeps,
The white like sliced cucumber, and the red
Like poker-chip! Along dark mains they flow
As wafts the sponging heart. The water-lily,
Subtle in seeming, bland to lover’s hand
Upthrust exploring, is in essence gross,
Multiple and corrupt. Thus, in the moonlight”
(She hooked a curtain and disclosed the moon)
“How cold and lucent! And this naked breast,
Whereon a blue vein writes Diana’s secret,
How simple! How seductive of the palm
That flatters with the finest tact of flesh!
Not silver is this flank, nor ivory,
Gold it is not, not copper, but distilled
Of lust in moonlight, and my own hand strays
To touch it in this moonlight, whence it came.”
Naked in moonlight, like a doll of wax,
On the stone floor nocturnal, she stood still
But moved her hands. The cruel mouth was curved,
Smiling a little; and her eyes were fixed,

In wonder, on Diana's hieroglyph.
And it was then (her nineteenth autumn come)
She heard at last, so often prophesied,
The singing of the blood. Her beauty broke
To sound beneath her hands, which moved from breast
To knee and back again, and bruised the flank
That was not gold or copper, but became
A throbbing sound beneath palpating palms.
Thus stood awhile; then sighed; then dropped her hands
And wept, as he (who loved her) had foretold.

V

It was the twentieth birthday, or the moon,
Which flung a careless net upon the house
Trapping the stone (as she had trapped the fly);
These, or the emptied heart of night, which filled
The house with weeping. In the room they lay
Weeping together. "Like-a harp it is"
(She said) "which but to sound, but once to sound,
Snaps every string. Better to die, than be
Conjointly now, henceforth, a broken thing
Where sound of life was once." She pressed his hand
Against her side, where once the doll was pressed,
Prince Ferdinand; but she was hungry still.
So then she held him hard between her knees
And heard the song of blood, outrageously,
And cried, "Shut eyes and kiss me!" "O, Arachne!
What web is this you weave, dear poison-mouth?"
"The web, alas, is cut as soon as woven,"
She answered. And the word she spoke was true.

VI

The moonlight and the house then sang together,
Yet not the house, but something in the house,
As if together they once more distilled
(Of blood and moonlight) ivory or gold,
Copper or silver; or, if not quite these
Something of which the moon contrived the surface
While blood beneath supplied the essence gross.

Useless! for it was spilled as soon as brimmed.
Prince Ferdinand was dead, Arachne dead,
The blood unmoving, and the moonlight vain.

GOYA

Goya drew a pig on a wall.
The five-year-old hairdresser's son
Saw, graved on a silver tray,
The lion; and sunsets were begun.

Goya smelt the bull-fight blood.
The pupil of the Carmelite
Gave his hands to a goldsmith, learned
To gild an aureole aright.

Goya saw the Puzzel's eyes:
Sang in the street (with a guitar)
And climbed the balcony; but Keats
(Under the halyards) wrote 'Bright star.'

Goya saw the Great Slut pick
The chirping human puppets up,
And laugh, with pendulous mountain lip,
And drown them in a coffee cup;

Or squeeze their little juices out
In arid hands, insensitive,
To make them gibber . . . Goya went
Among the catacombs to live.

He saw gross Ronyons of the air,
Harelipped and goitered, raped in flight
By hairless pimps, umbrella-winged:
Tumult above Madrid at night.

He heard the seconds in his clock
Crack like seeds, divulge, and pour
Abysmal filth of Nothingness
Between the pendulum and the floor:

Torrents of dead veins, rotted cells,
Tonsils decayed, and fingernails:
Dead hair, dead fur, dead claws, dead skin:
Nostrils and lids; and cauls and veils;

And eyes that still, in death, remained
(Unlidded and unlashed) aware
Of the foul core, and, fouler yet,
The region worm that ravins there.

Stench flowed out of the second's tick.
And Goya swam with it through Space,
Sweating the fetor from his limbs,
And stared upon the unfeatured face

That did not see, and sheltered naught,
But was, and is. The second gone,
Goya returned, and drew the face;
And scrawled beneath it, 'This I have known' . . .

And drew four slatterns, in an attic,
Heavy, with heads on arms, asleep:
And underscribed it, 'Let them slumber,
Who, if they woke, could only weep' . . .

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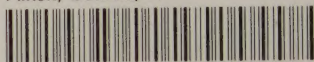
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